

**Talking Story about Art and Life:**  
**Narratives of Contemporary Oceanic Artists and Their Work**

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佐藤さん御家族、青山さん御家族、妙井さん御家族、丁さん御家族、森上さん、井元さんへ ... 大変有り難うございました。

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## Abstract

*Talking Story about Art and Life: Narratives of Contemporary Oceanic Artists and Their Work* takes a narrative, biographical approach to examine the lives and selected works of five contemporary Oceanic artists living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand – Ioane Ioane, Ema Tavola, Brett Graham, Robin White, and Siliga David Setoga. The narrative methodology, inspired by the Hawaiian notion of “talking story,” utilises informal conversations as sites of knowledge production. This approach allowed more personal and varied information to emerge, which speaks to the pluralities of identity. Instead of focusing primarily on visually analysing the creative output of the artists, their artworks and practices are incorporated as aspects of their voices that contribute to the narratives of their lives. The participants told stories that engage with the complexities intrinsic to their lives, revealing areas to research for the purpose of supporting their narratives. The supporting research investigates the notion of *vā*, Oceanic curatorial practices, trickster discourse, insider/outsider discourse, and *fa’a Sāmoa*. In carrying out this investigation, this thesis illustrates choices artists are making to express their voices on their own terms. Bringing to light these choices also reminds viewers/readers that we can actively shape our own narratives. By privileging the artists’ stories told in their own words, this thesis honours Oceanic oral traditions and moves forward our understanding of these contemporary Oceanic artists and their artistic practices.

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## Note on Orthography, Foreign Words, Documentation Style

Where possible, Oceanic words are spelled in this thesis as they are in Oceanic languages, including diacritical marks. Writing words without diacritical marks and using an apostrophe instead of a glottal stop character, in my opinion, are misspellings. However, because there is a lack of standardised orthography and it is common practice to print words without diacritical marks or substitute the glottal stop character with an apostrophe, “sic” is not used when quoting text with such misspelled words.

Unfamiliar words are roughly glossed at their first occurrence either parenthetically or in a footnote. While these “definitions” allow the reader to continue, they do not encompass the nuances of deeper meanings acquired with cultural knowledge. Words of non-English origin are not italicised in this thesis, unless quoting passages that engage in that practice.

This thesis uses MLA documentation style,<sup>1</sup> which is a style accepted by the Art History and Theory Programme. However, because readers of the thesis requested clarification on MLA conventions used, it may be useful to explain them here. In-text citations of one of two or more works by the same author calls for a shortened version of the title, rather than a publication year. All in-text parenthetical citations refer to a source on the works-cited list, where the reader can find more detailed publication information, including the year. As the heading “Works Cited” indicates, the list contains all the works cited in the text. It does not include materials that were consulted but not cited. When citing a review, “Rev. of” precedes the title of the work reviewed. To adhere to the thesis format preferred by the Art History and Theory Programme the following deviations from MLA style have been made: block quotations are single-spaced, as are entries in the list of works cited with increased space between entries.

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<sup>1</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (by Joseph Gibaldi) was the text most often referred to because research for this project began before the 7<sup>th</sup> edition was published.



## Introduction

*Talking Story about Art and Life: Narratives of Contemporary Oceanic Artists and Their*

*Work* examines, through a narrative, biographical approach, five artists living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> A series of chapters devoted to the lives and selected works of John Ioane, Ema Tavola, Brett Graham, Robin White, and Siliga David Setoga compose the body of the thesis. Instead of focusing primarily on the artwork of each artist, the thesis considers wider influences on the participants and introduces the artists through anecdotes and stories told in the artists' own words and through biographies created in large part from interviews with the artists. The participants' artistic practices and the stories they tell about their lives and work all contribute to understanding who they are.

The thesis approaches the five participants as people and creative thinkers rather than solely as producers of creative output. They each created an environment that allowed the way I think about contemporary Oceanic art and Oceanic studies to change. The ability to shift perspective can be one of the most powerful and effective tools in life. However, this ability needs to be developed. As Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, explains, "Generally speaking, once you're already in a difficult situation, it isn't possible to change your attitude simply by adopting a particular thought once or twice. Rather it's through a

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis the country most commonly known as New Zealand is referred to as "Aotearoa New Zealand," "Aotearoa," and "New Zealand." At times the terms are interchangeable, however, "Aotearoa" is used in the context of acknowledging the land's first (Oceanic) settlers, "New Zealand" is used to acknowledge the land's colonial and post-colonial contexts, and "Aotearoa New Zealand" is usually used to remind the reader that in more recent times efforts have been made to implement "bicultural" (and to a lesser degree multicultural) approaches to representing the country. All three terms refer to the same masses of land. Māori language instructors introduced "Aotearoa" to me as the Māori word for New Zealand. Since then it has been brought to my attention that South Island iwi use "Aotearoa" to refer to only the North Island. However, for Waitangi Day 2013, Ngāi Tahu's website refers to locations on the both the North and South Islands as being "all over Aotearoa": "Ngāi Tahu whānau all over Aotearoa are celebrating Waitangi Day; festivals are happening at Ōtautahi (Ōnuku, Rāpaki, Kaiapoi and Okains Bay), Ōtepoti and Tamaki Makaurau" (Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu). There may still be instances when "Aotearoa" refers to only the North Island, but for the purposes of this thesis "Aotearoa," "New Zealand," and "Aotearoa New Zealand" occupy the same physical space. However, those spaces may be ideologically distinct from one another.

process of learning, training, and getting used to new viewpoints that enables you to deal with difficulty” (176). I chose to explore the influences in the lives of the artists and treat their artistic practices as a part of their lives because shifting paradigms is part of a larger, lifelong process of getting used to new viewpoints. Taking a biographical, narrative approach provides a way to move toward an awareness about both unconscious and conscious motivations, adding to our understanding of how the participants have come to find their voices and forms of expression.

I asked each of the artists about how they recognise creativity as part of how they process the world. Not all of them thought of creativity as having to do with how they process information or the world around them, until I asked them about how they had done things differently from the way others had throughout their lives. In this thesis the notion of “creativity” refers to the use of imagination and original ideas, and is not confined to the production of art. However, making an artwork is certainly a creative act, and processes of creative problem solving are often apparent in the artwork of the five participants.

Rothenberg and Hausman point out, “The processes of creation, particularly artistic creation, highlight issues about unconscious and conscious motivation, and creative thinking is a form of cognition with special relationships to learning, concept formation, and problem-solving” (4). Creativity in one’s thought processes is what allows for the capacity to construct knowledge by seeing things in fresh ways. By creating space for the participating artists’ to tell their stories, this thesis is adding to understanding how original thinkers do what they do. Also, because the artists’ stories sometimes counter conventional ways Oceanic art and artists have been written about, providing their own words is useful.

My background in area studies in the Oceanic region, with its investigations of the politics of representation, also contributes to the importance this thesis places on allowing people to represent themselves and have final approval over how they are portrayed.

Historically, words and images describing the Oceanic region and its peoples have been through the gaze of colonisers, missionaries, explorers, travellers, scholars, and others who did not necessarily privilege the lived experiences of Oceanic peoples. Asking the artists to tell their own stories in their own words is, in part, an attempt to interrupt a disempowering pattern and recover agency.

Each of the five chapters of the body of the thesis focuses on one of the five participating artists. Each chapter is divided into three sections, beginning with a narrative-informed biography and closing with stories and anecdotes from the artists in their own words. The middle section of each chapter examines a topic that emerged as important during the semi-structured interviews and conversations I had with each artist. This middle section provides background information or contextualises a major idea that relates to how the artist discussed his or her life or work. In the first two sections, the passages quoting the artists are italicised to differentiate the text. Italics are not used in the third sections, as the artists' own stories comprise the entire third sections. Chapter lengths vary. Instead of trying to treat all of the artists "equally," the thesis respects each artist's unique style of communication.

This thesis certainly does not give an all-encompassing view of contemporary Oceanic art. Instead, it adds to existing literature, which has explored themes and issues, by looking more narrowly at the unique contributions of five individuals. Each phrase of the thesis title, *Talking Story about Art and Life: Narratives of Contemporary Oceanic Artists and Their Work*, speaks to the frameworks, key sources, and methodologies underpinning the thesis. Parsing the phrases in the title introduces the thesis.

## TALKING STORY

The phrase “talk story” comes from Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE), which in Hawai‘i is the language locally referred to as “Pidgin.”<sup>3</sup> In Hawai‘i from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pidgin developed out of a need to communicate when native Hawaiians worked along side people from many countries including China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, and Portugal on sugarcane plantations, usually run by Americans and English speaking Europeans.<sup>4</sup> To “talk story” in Hawai‘i today means to shoot the breeze, chit-chat, or enjoy a nice “chin wag.”

Talking story may appear to be a meaningless exchange, but particularly in cultures strongly rooted in oral traditions, talking story continues to be a significant part of knowledge transmission, even after the implementation of writing systems. Many important exchanges happen while talking story. Borrowing the phrase and idea of “talking story” informs my methodology and also acknowledges my entrance into Oceania through Hawai‘i.<sup>5</sup> Bringing Hawai‘i into the thesis also serves as a reminder that, although the five artists live and work in Aotearoa New Zealand, the focus of the thesis (and of the artists) looks outward and holds space for an interconnected Oceania.

In Hawai‘i, speaking Pidgin is sometimes looked down upon. For example, some school administrators have discouraged the use of Pidgin in schools, attributing the use of Pidgin to

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Hawai‘i Creole English see Romaine, Sakoda and Siegel, Reinecke, Sato.

<sup>4</sup> Pidgin started as a language spoken on plantations but later became the primary language spoken in the homes of most people born in Hawai‘i. Because a community of native speakers developed, it was no longer a pidgin language and instead became a creole. Though linguists refer to today’s local language, which developed from Pidgin Hawaiian and then Pidgin English as “Hawaiian Creole English,” local people in Hawai‘i call it “Pidgin” (Sakoda and Seigel).

<sup>5</sup> There are “heavier” or “stronger” (basilect) and “lighter” (acrolect) versions of Pidgin. In the heavier form of Pidgin the auxiliary verb “stay” indicates the progressive aspect of the verb or the -ing form of the verb. So if I were more familiar with Pidgin, instead of “talking story” I might “stay talk story.” While I use the phrase “talking story” to reference my connection to Hawai‘i, using the phrase as expressed in a “lighter” dialect of Pidgin (with the -ing form) also points to my remove from the local culture.

lower English test scores.<sup>6</sup> I would like to make clear that in the title of this thesis, the Pidgin phrase “talking story,” rather than diminishing the importance of narrative exchanges to meaningless chit-chat, instead recognises seemingly casual conversations as noteworthy sites of productive thinking.

Karen Ann Watson discusses “talk story” as a language event and defines it as a local term in Hawai‘i for “a rambling personal narrative mixed with folk materials” (54). By “folk materials” Watson seems to mean that “talk story” tends to focus on supernatural or spiritual experiences. She says that it is often a “matter of soul-searching” (58). My understanding of “talk story” follows more along the lines of Sakoda and Siegel’s definition of it – a verb meaning “to have informal conversation; tell stories; gossip” (115). But the idea of “soul-searching” is also appropriate to the context of the conversations I had with the artists participating in this project because they were each asked how their work might speak, if at all, to the notion of transformation.

### **Talking Story in Art History**

As Michael Baxandall points out, “If one looks at the origins of modern art history and art criticism, which are in the Renaissance, it is noticeable that really it arose out of conversation” (137). Giorgio Vasari is credited as the first (Western) art historian. His collection of 142 biographies of Renaissance artists (first published in 1550), *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times*, is considered a foundation of art historical writing and was born out of conversations he had with many of the artists. Vasari was also a painter and an architect, but as a writer, he was first and foremost a biographer.

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<sup>6</sup> More recent publications celebrating Pidgin poetry, prose, and plays suggest it may be gaining recognition as a unique language that reflects local culture in Hawai‘i.

In 1563 Vasari helped found the Florence Academy of the Arts of Drawing (Accademia delle Arti del Disegno). The academy contributed to raising the social status of artists of the time by placing value on the way they thought. As Vernon Minor notes, prior to the Renaissance, artists were judged by their labour not their ideas:

In the Middle Ages one thought of the artist as a worker, one whose hands were more important than his mind, but in our look backward we have seen that this split between hand and mind although not resolved, reversed itself. With the founding of the academy in Renaissance Italy, the artist's social status and intellectual ambitions increased. The cognitive ability of the artist, not just some relatively insignificant knack, received attention; in fact, this ability was nurtured in the academy. (26)

Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* is biased in favour of Florentines and includes anecdotes that may or may not have been factually accurate, but as Paul Barolsky notes, Vasari's writing, in contrast to "much of the astringent writing of modern art history," brought his subjects to life, inspiring them (382). The artists participating in this thesis are still alive (as were some of Vasari's subjects when he wrote about them) and eloquently speak for themselves at gallery openings, symposia, and in everyday life. But in this thesis, where the artists have allowed me to create a textual venue for their stories and discussions on their work and lives, it is also my aim to inspire<sup>7</sup> the people rather than simply follow the trajectory of their artistic careers or "objectively" analyse their work.

The tradition of writing about art was initiated by an artist and was in many ways for artists. In the early Renaissance artists were speaking with other artists about beauty, art, and theory. But, by the second half of the sixteenth century most people writing about art were not artists but individuals educated in the arts and ancient history. Even though Vasari is considered the first art historian, these later philosophers and rhetoricians are the

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<sup>7</sup> I use "inspire" here, not the more conventional "inspire" (as called for by one examiner), to acknowledge the impact of Barolsky's words, also to convey the intention for the writing in the thesis to bring the participants to life (off the page). It was not my aim to "inspire" the participants in the sense of filling them with the urge to do something (the research process did, however, inspire at least one of the participants to take action that may not have otherwise been considered).

predecessors of today's art historians. Throughout the centuries there have been important players who constructed models to explain artistic heritage, each having their strengths and each having their critics, often in the following generation, pointing to the weaknesses in each method.

It is not in the purview of this thesis to give a detailed historiography of art history. However, it is worth mentioning that until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the discipline of art history was mostly concerned with visual aspects of artwork – style, attributions, the meaning of images, distinguishing significant works of art. A “new art history” emerged along side a whole range of turns and shifts experienced in most fields in the humanities as a result of social and political upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s the turn toward examining art in cultural contexts and with a greater self-consciousness about its methods was decisive. Jon Bird coined the term in 1982 at a conference at Middlesex Polytechnic in England. The “new art history” made room for the marginal and non-canonical, given the impact of Marxist ideas, structuralism, minority voices, feminist theory, postcolonial discourse, and disruptions of single dominant narratives.

Even though the “new art history” upset hierarchical systems and historical classifications by creating space for more voices and more cultures, it can be argued that the “new art history” merely modernised the existing discipline. Like any active discipline, art history has changed over time. Shifts in consciousness generally have been accepted, and examining a work of art in the context of the world from which it came or to which it referred hardly seems “new” now. Mark Roskill is not alone in holding the opinion that “there has not been great change in the structure of the discipline overall” (5). Much of the general discourse in art history is still about explaining and classifying, and whether one subscribes to an older art history or a relatively newer art history, the art historian's focus is primarily on the artwork. As art historian Hans Belting pointed out in his 1987 investigation of the models

that shaped the discipline (*The End of the History of Art?*), “Art history, as everybody knows, studies vehicles of representation, namely, works of art” (57). Activities in the discipline of art history were and are often carried out with little contact with those involved in art production. Even with the “new art history,” theoretical issues are the lenses through which work is viewed, and the role of the artist is sometimes diminished. In the late 1990s, for example, Scott Heller observed that while interest in the work of female artists had grown (with the “new art history”), studies of individuals were out of fashion. One reason Heller gives is that monographs do not sell well; another is that “art historians are calling for scholarship on broad cultural themes rather than on individual artists” (A23).

Whether new or old, at least part of the work of art historians has always involved analysis of aesthetic texts. Such analysis can be considered a translation of sorts. As the Italian proverb points out, “Translation is treason” (*Tradurre e tradire*), meaning that exact translation is impossible, so any translation implies a betrayal of the original.<sup>8</sup> My interpretations of the artists’ work and words in this thesis are also certainly treasonous. However, by placing importance on having the artists speak for themselves and by taking a narrative, biographical approach to understanding the artists, I hope to minimise my crimes against the artists and their work. For these reasons, talking story about both art and life was important. Rather than producing translations of visual texts, this thesis allows ambiguous stories about creativity to unfold.

When writing about art, the degree to which the focus includes the artist has a wide-ranging continuum. At one end, the “personal genius” of an artist-hero is emphasised. This type of writing often valorises the artist and brings to life romantic notions of a tortured artist whose vision can transform the world. At the other end is Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin’s idea of an “art history without names.” At the turn of the twentieth century

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Richard Minear for first introducing me to this proverb.



Wölfflin was what Minor considers “one of the most cogent and effective art historians” (109). His empirical approach based on direct observation of works of art has taught generations of art history students a structured way of looking at and analysing formal and stylistic aspects of an artwork. In the first German edition (which appeared in 1915) of Wölfflin’s book *Principles of Art History* he suggests that the names and identities of particular artists are of such minimal importance they can be left out (Minor 122). Subsequent editions of the book did not include that reference to an art history without names, however, the notion of being “art historical” is sometimes still distanced from the personal. For example, in Minor’s discussion of *The School of Athens*,<sup>9</sup> he suggests to the reader, “before considering the human element, the story, or message, let’s be ‘art historical’ and consider the work in abstract terms” (70). Being “art historical” is primarily about considering artwork and much less (sometimes not at all) about the “human element.” Even though the thesis does not focus primarily on artworks but treats them instead as aspects of the stories that make up the lives of the artists, it does not cast aside the tenets of art history (old or new). The artworks in the thesis are discussed in terms of form, content, meaning, how meaning is expressed, iconography, social or political context.

There are, of course, art historians who also call for more of the personal. Colin Eisler, for example, finds the flight from personality in so much twentieth-century art historical scholarship “profoundly puzzling” (80). He speculates that the move away from the personal in art history may have been in part a desire for “scholarly objectivity,” which has no room for romanticising the artist-hero or for psychoanalysing every occurrence of a “banana or baguette” in a painting. While he finds staying away from these approaches quite sensible, he also recognises the need to consider the artist in life as well as in art:

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<sup>9</sup> *Scuola di Atene* in Italian, fresco by Raphael, painted between 1509 and 1510 in the Vatican.

There may well be a mercy to sparing the reader a scholarly genre all too readily more psycho than history. Potted amateur shrinkage of painters and sculptors is not what is so often missing, but rather the simple acknowledgment that the self in life as well as art requires scholarly attention: in terms of the old song, you can't have one without the other. *Art is history and herstory*. (80)

Roskill acknowledges that particularly in modern times the artist is in a privileged position regarding her/his work, but Roskill goes on to assert that ultimately it is up to the viewer/art historian to decide whether or not the artwork communicates successfully. In Roskill's opinion, artists' statements do not necessarily help determine what the artist intended to do "because most often the question is whether or not what the artist can tell us is really relevant to the work itself. Artists may be deceived in their thinking about what they are doing or did. Their natural medium of expression is visual, not verbal, and therefore what they say in words may well be parenthetical, or even irrelevant, to the work" (176). This seems to me an example of an art historian elevating his own role. Writing about art is also a creative act, and in scholarly writing the scholar's insights are what matter most. Characterising artists as incapable of thinking clearly about their work or verbally expressing themselves coherently because they are primarily visual processors is extremely short-sighted.

Roskill does view the artist as a thinker and a creator but for limited purposes:

In art history one enters into the personality of the great artist as a thinker and a creator. To do this is a commitment, the nature of which has nothing to do with the kind of "myths" about the relationship between the lives of artists and their works, on which movies and popular novels are based; nor is it a matter of communing with the great in some largely intuitional kind of way. Rather, what counts is the deep and true and forceful understanding that is reached through a study of art history: of what it took to produce a particular work of art. (182).

If one is going to cast aside myths and make a commitment to what is a deep and true and forceful understanding of a thinker and creator, it seems a missed opportunity to limit one's view of "what counts" to what it took to produce a particular work of art. This thesis does,

overall, engage in art historical practices: to look closely and carefully, see things that others may not have paid attention to, and articulate those observations into written language.

However, instead of viewing any of the selected works of these five artists as an autonomous work of art, it treats each piece as the work of an artist. The thesis is about getting to know the participants through their stories and practices. It looks at the circumstances in which they found making art a meaningful thing to have done because the artistic output of the participants contributes to the stories that make up the lives of the artists. But, it takes a biographical, narrative approach to allow for a better view of the artists as people. The last sentence of this thesis is part of a response one of the artists gave to the question, “Why do you make art?” It reads, “Hopefully, I am not defined just by the things I make.” This thesis honours that hope.

Even though many art historians have stayed away from the personal, the field of art history has always been concerned with the creative process. As Minor asserts, “The art historian wants to understand how the artist’s impulse to create is rooted in culture and biology – in both nurture and nature” (35). Taking a biographical approach allows for inquiry into both the nature of the artist and the environment from which the artist comes. The conversational methodology allows for a more nuanced understanding of those environments and creates opportunities for a more collaborative process. I have taken to heart a plea made by Sidney Moko Mead over twenty years ago “that we, the analysers of art, should include the artists we are studying as partners in our analyses” because after all, “[w]e are dealing with a positive, creative and co-operative human endeavour – the creation of art” (“Attitudes” 16). In placing the methodological emphasis on conversation and asking the artists to be my “partners in analyses,” I feel as if I am breaking rules of art history. However, by taking a narrative biographical approach, I am also returning to art history’s foundations – an investigation of lives.

### **Talking Story Methodology**

The decision to use a “talking story” methodology arose out of placing importance on having the artists speak for themselves. The act of talking story occurred mostly during the semi-structured interview process. However, creating an open and transparent environment for the interview process began well before interviewing the artists, and the process of engagement continued through the final invitation to the artists to make changes before the final submission.

When a student enrolls in a PhD programme at the University of Canterbury, s/he is allowed up to six months to write a project proposal explaining why the research is being done (aims, objectives, significance), how the research is being done (research design, methodology), and background information (defining terms and frameworks, literature review), as well as timelines and budgets. Even though many PhD theses, in the end, do not resemble what was described in the project proposal, the proposal sets up an intention and a plan. From the outset the intention of my proposed project was to create a textual venue where the artists could speak for themselves. Because scholars discussing contemporary Oceanic art had already examined trends and overarching issues, I proposed a thesis that would give voice to individual stories and personal narratives that highlight human experience. Instead of focusing primarily on artwork, the project proposal outlined a narrative, biographical approach that would bring out stories that made up the lives of the people who made the artwork. When I met with each of the artists to ask if he or she would be interested in participating in the project, I left with them a copy of the project proposal so they could consider my influences and intentions before deciding whether or not to participate. Each of the five artists I approached agreed to participate in the project.

Research involving human “subjects” requires approval from the university’s Human Ethics Committee.<sup>10</sup> The Human Ethics Committee reviewed and approved this project. While oversight and approval from the Human Ethics Committee ensures minimal deception and risk of harm to the participants, their procedures were not the largest factors guiding my conduct when requesting the participants’ permission, interviewing them, or editing the data they provided. Protocols of oral history go even further than most institutional review boards in their emphasis on respecting active participants in life narrative research. Established oral history procedures call for providing the participants the opportunity to say whether or not the written document is an accurate representation of what they meant. If not, the participants may take the lead in making changes. I chose this methodology in an attempt to diminish the power differential often found in structures of the academy between those who write about or collect “subjects” and the “subjects” being observed.

Before each interview I consulted books, newspapers, exhibition catalogues, journal articles, the artist’s curriculum vitae, and other relevant print and video sources to formulate questions and create a personal timeline. Though I entered the interviews prepared with questions, the interviews were semi-structured so as not to limit the field of inquiry.<sup>11</sup> The format of the semi-structured interviews resembled that of life history interviews – biographical and roughly chronological. Before starting the interviews I asked if the

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<sup>10</sup> Institutional review boards, such as the University of Canterbury’s Human Ethics Committee, were put in place primarily to prevent bodily and psychological harm in human subject research. The Human Ethics Committee required that I secure data provided by the participants with a lock or password protection; provide an information sheet that states the participants’ right to withdraw from the project at any time, including the withdrawal of any information provided; and obtain written consent. At the initial meeting with each of the artists, set to discuss the project and ask them to consider participating, in addition to leaving with them the project proposal, I also reviewed and left with them an information sheet (Appendix A), consent form (Appendix B), and Proust Questionnaire (Appendix C). For a brief history of human subject research and the challenges its protocols pose humanities researchers see Howes.

<sup>11</sup> The format of structured interviews, where all of the interviewees are asked the same set of pre-established questions in the same order, would not serve this inquiry well. Nor would a completely unstructured interview, as there were specific topics I wanted to at least touch upon.

participant was comfortable, and I tried to maintain a comfortable environment by observing and calibrating the speaker's presence. Talking story with the artists was an important part of the process to build rapport throughout the exchange. During the interviews I gave the interviewees my full attention and listened openly with genuine interest in what they had to say. I held the intention that the interviews were about the artists and not about me displaying my knowledge, biases, or judgments. I ended every interview by asking if there was anything else the interviewee would like to talk about or say. Each of the five participants is highly skilled at making connections. They also contributed greatly to building rapport during the process.<sup>12</sup>

The interviews were the primary vehicle for "collecting data." With the artists' permission the interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, usually with a microphone attached to the interviewee's clothing but occasionally with the recorder placed on a table without an additional microphone. My role as interviewer was to encourage the interviewee to talk story. I tried to create an environment where the artists were not subjects to be observed but instead equal, if not elevated, participants. Darrell Lum describes a typical local party in Hawai'i as consisting of "a buffet table set out in the carport with family and friends sitting on folding chairs or on coolers of beer and soda, talking story" (11). The one-on-one interviews I organised certainly were not parties, nor was I in a position to set up a buffet table (in fact the artists were often the ones who fed me in their homes or studios), but I strove to create a space that allowed for informal conversation. I encouraged the artists to talk at length, and I followed their leads. It was often on tangents where insights were found. After all, as Sandra Taosaka has found, "In some situations, talk story is viewed as a waste of time, idle chatter leading nowhere. But in the right context, talk story can be a

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<sup>12</sup> Discussing how the participants perceived me would be speculative, however, because I am American, it is possible they extended the courtesy of fuller explanations than they may have offered to someone from Aotearoa New Zealand.

powerful tool for learning” (1). And as Nicholas Thomas has remarked, in the 1990 exhibition showcasing a creolised range of art practices, *Te Moemoea no Iotefa/The Dream of Joseph*, curated by Rangihiroa Panoho, interviews with the artists were crucial: “What the interview conversations convey—to a greater degree than the pictures themselves—are tensions about identity that an idea of culture might legislate” (“Dream” 295). Interviews reveal the personal. The informal approach allowed attention to turn to everyday practices that may be taken for granted and the idiosyncrasies of personal experiences, both of which produce knowledge that even the speaker may not recognise as knowledge.

Each of the initial interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours. Semi-structured follow-up interviews and many unstructured conversations also contributed to building the stories presented in this thesis. While the semi-structured interviews flowed by talking story and allowed the artists to take the lead, it was also important to me to engage in meaningful discourse around their creative processes. To this end, I kept in mind and tried to practise the skills needed for a successful interview as described by Lewis Anthony Dexter. Although Dexter’s views on the gender of interviewer and interviewee are dated (published in 1970), the skills he refers to still apply. A good interviewer must do the following:

be listening to what the man [interviewee] is saying; he must think of more questions to ask; he must be thinking of what the question was he just asked, to make sure the man is answering it. He must know what’s already been covered; know what he has yet to cover. He must anticipate where he’s going to go if the man, while he’s talking, indicates he’s about through with the subject; and in anticipating where the conversation is going to go, he must in his mind be beginning to try to formulate the next question so it will come out well-phrased. (118)

Interviewing is a common and powerful way to acquire information and yet gathering information through interviews is a complex and cumbersome process. According to the Center for Oral History at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, transcribing a 90-minute recording takes approximately 12 hours. The interviews for this project totalled over 15 hours. I also recorded symposia presentations, artist talks, panel discussions, and a public

debate, but they were not transcribed from beginning to end in the same way as the interviews. I transcribed each of the interviews (initial and follow-up) myself, so I listened to each recording several times. I printed out the transcripts, noted what was being discussed in each section, highlighted keywords, and repeatedly read the transcripts. I sat with the material heeding advice from Dr. Jessica Johnston to “trust the data.” As I became more familiar with the material, patterns emerged in the topics each artist visited. These patterns determined what I perceived as important issues as raised by the speakers.

The interview transcripts were used as a quarry to create the narratives in the thesis. Narrative format is easier to read and allows for reorganising a story when details about the beginning were told at the end or when things were clarified from the initial interview in subsequent follow-up interviews. Therefore, the narratives presented in this thesis are not in interview format or recounted exactly verbatim, which would include every non-lexical, pause-filling utterance, and obviously only a portion of what each artist told me can be presented here. Transferring the information into another mode changes the representation and takes the interview out of context. Therefore, maximal effort went into preserving the viewpoints of the artists as expressed in their own words, and I made great efforts in the editing process to accurately reflect what was said and to preserve the distinctive voice of each artist. In this process lies the inherent risk of the writer coming to speak for the participant, which is why I found imperative following oral history protocols that call for providing the participants with the opportunity to say whether or not what I had written was an accurate representation of what they meant. I sent drafts of chapters to the artists so they could change, add, or withdraw information. Revisions were made at a number of stages and requests were integrated into following drafts. Simply creating narratives based on interviews does not necessarily produce fair interpretations. It was the back and forth process of continuing to receive approval, permission, and confirmation from the participants that



they and what they had said were not being misrepresented that minimise my acts of treasonous translations. However, the level of participation in the editing process from the artists varied. Therefore, I may never be sure of the degree to which they approve.

The process of putting the narratives together engaged my own developed responses. My own filters generated interview questions and directed how I read the “raw data.” My editing choices reflect unique circumstances of my personal response, while also respecting the complexities, quality, and essence of what the artists shared. It may be true that we only see what we are looking for and only look for what we can see, but, as best I could, I entered the process without hypotheses or pre-set assumptions. I took an approach that let the source material interviews determine the path of inquiry. Part of honouring talking story insists remaining open. Even though the phrase implies that talking is the main activity, as with talanoa, another Oceanic practice of talking story, listening gives the process life. I chose to “trust the data” while meditating on the transcripts, sitting with them, and remaining open to hear what they would reveal as important. These may sound like unconventional editing processes, but when I received comments from the artists approving of how I treated the text from the interviews my choices were confirmed.

Some may argue that the artists’ approval carries less weight than I have given it. Art historian Elizabeth Rankin, for example, who uses interviews with artists to gain insights into their creativity, has found that artists are “curiously uncritical of things written about them.” Therefore, she, as many art historians may, discounts the confirmation I perceive from the feedback I received from the artists who participated in this thesis. While it may be true that some artists do not direct any attention toward what is written about them or are uncritical of the things they do come across, there is a significant distinction between writing that talks *about* an artist or an artist’s work and writing that *represents* an artist or what an artist said or meant. There are actors who do not care about what is written in reviews of their work but

who sue tabloids for misrepresenting them as people. It is easier to use this illustration from popular culture because, in general, actors gain more celebrity than artists. However, even in the world of contemporary Oceanic art there are accounts of artists feeling misrepresented because students and scholars make assumptions, do not ask questions, or present the artist's philosophies as their own. Even when the focus is on the artwork, Billie Lythberg, as project liaison for *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the Museum*,<sup>13</sup> found that many artists involved with *Pasifika Styles* “disagreed with previous interpretations of their work by the academic community, and were anxious to avoid potential misinterpretations of their art in Cambridge” (43-44).

Rosana Raymond has also written about the impact of academic (mis)perceptions and writing that misrepresents her and her work:

The celebration of my cultural heritage is fused into my work as an artist, whether perceived as invented, revivalist, authentic, traditional, contemporary, identity based, gendered, or craft based. Whatever label you want to call it, or has been called, this is not how I and other *HYBRID* Polynesian artists view our role in producing art that speaks and relates to living in Polynesia today in a modern urban environment. (italics in original, 149)

When Raymond first encountered academics who were interested in her work, she was sceptical. She describes the views she found in articles as “a one-way dialogue” in which professors and journalists challenged the legitimacy of her culture and the forms it took in recent times (153). She sometimes found the observations of people outside her creative community off base and off putting:

To read about yourself labelled as hybrid and having your authenticity questioned by people outside your community left me feeling disempowered. I was often frustrated at the many mistakes and misrepresentation that appeared in articles, especially by peoples who had spent very little, or no time, with us or within our community. Often our involvement as practitioners was welcomed but our analysis of what we

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<sup>13</sup> University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 5 May 2006 to 23 February 2008

were doing was not considered as important unless validated by an educated expert. (153)

Despite these experiences, or perhaps because of them, Raymond chose to develop relationships with institutions holding Oceanic collections. Connecting with the collections strengthened her bond with her ancestors, and making those connections through institutions allowed for pathways to two-way dialogues with academics as well as community organisations. Her involvement with the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum created space for Raymond to experience the museums as arenas for cultural exchange. Being part of a dialogue instead of being the observed subject of a monologue made a world of difference.

Two-way dialogue was an intrinsic part of this talking story methodology. Even though the editing process was my own creative act, trying to portray in prose a sense of a person, to correct any misrepresentations, the chapters were sent to the artists. Some participants offered more feedback or requested more changes than others, but they all engaged, which is why, for me, their approval carries so much weight.

### **Talking Story in Existing Literature on Contemporary Oceanic Art**

One recent example of talking story in existing literature on contemporary Oceanic art has come out of Rosanna Raymond's journey away from being the subject of one-sided observations. The two-way dialogue between Raymond and institutions became more personal once she entered venues where art historians and anthropologists talk story amongst themselves: "I started to attend some of the conferences that focused on Polynesian arts and culture, and to get involved with art historians and anthropologists. I was curious to hear what scholars had to say and found that I could add my own voice to theirs" (Raymond and Salmond 9). A dialogue between Raymond and social anthropologist Amiria Salmond led to the pair producing the exhibition *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the Museum* and editing its

accompanying publication, which includes a diversity of voices of those involved – academics, museum professionals, students, and artists. *Pasifika Styles* invited contemporary practitioners to engage with historic Oceanic artefacts held in an ethnographic museum resulting in an exhibition, a performing arts festival, community outreach programmes and workshops.

*Kōrero Mai*,<sup>14</sup> an audio installation produced by Sarah Robins for *Pasifika Styles* particularly privileged having the artists tell their stories in their own words. Robins created an alternative to museum audio guides, which she had found “dry in nature, dense with information and assume a high degree of background knowledge or education” (119). She thought the exhibition audience might appreciate hearing the artworks discussed through the voices of the artists themselves. Robins received a range of responses from the artists, both in terms of their resistance or openness to being recorded and in what they shared. Robins asked the artists to “introduce themselves in a way they considered appropriate” and saw her primary job as taking her own voice out of the conversation and to “edit the interview as honestly as possible” (120). In her essay discussing creating the installation, she did not detail that editing process, however, it seems inherent in her process of editing “as honestly as possible” that she was holding the intention that the space was for the artists to tell their own stories in their own words. Perhaps not dissimilar to my own editing process discussed above.

One of the most well known examples of a publication privileging contemporary Oceanic artists talking story is *Speaking in Colour: Conversations with Artists of Pacific Island Heritage* by Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira. *Speaking in Colour* dedicates several pages to each of the ten artists it features. It intersperses the authors’ words that

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<sup>14</sup> In reference to Robins’ installation *Kōrero Mai*, Robins translates the Māori phrase as “speak to me” (119).

prime the reader for the artists' words that follow, the words of the artists taken from conversations with the authors, a portrait of each artist, and illustrations of selected works by the artists. This book was a departure from many publications on Oceanic art that cover a large span of time, often from prehistory to the time of writing the publication, and discuss mostly stylistic differences between geographic areas in Oceania. The authors noticed that by the 1990s New Zealanders of Oceanic background were "making their mark in the art world, in the fashion industry, in music and dance, in politics, in industry, and on the sports field" (9). They focused narrowly on ten artists who were working in Aotearoa New Zealand at that time. The authors' aim was to "facilitate a more intimate understanding of the artists and their work" (10). Perhaps influenced by their own research backgrounds (they each hold an MA in anthropology) *Speaking in Colour* was less about an "art historical" view of the artists' work and more about the artists' human experiences:

It has not been our intention to present an art historical overview of New Zealand/Pacific artists within New Zealand, or to offer art critiques regarding form, colour, composition, and style. We offer instead conversations with the artists, that are mere snapshots of how they see themselves at this moment. We share the lives and experiences they have allowed us to glimpse. Through their voices and stories we hope to add some understanding to the subtle shades and hues that are part of the fabric of our society. (11)

Mallon and Pereira are not traditionally credentialed art historians but are regarded as experts in Oceanic art. *Speaking in Colour* quickly became essential reading for anyone studying contemporary Oceanic art (particularly in New Zealand). Its open approach inspired this thesis.

*Speaking in Colour* provided a space for artists to tell their stories in their own words, and Mallon and Pereira have continued to engage in talking story methodology. However, four years later, in *Pacific Art Niu Sila: The Pacific Dimension of Contemporary New Zealand Arts*, the same editors commented that creating *Speaking in Colour* made them aware of a broader context of contemporary arts being practised by Pacific peoples in New

Zealand. Therefore, *Pacific Art Niu Sila* speaks to overarching issues, and in doing so its structure is inherently less conducive to giving voice to individual stories that sometimes speak specifically to the complexities in those overarching issues. As has been the tendency in the field of art history, much of the discourse in contemporary Oceanic art has been through the lenses of various emerging issues. Perhaps the most prominent issue discussed comes out of the politics of representation. Curators, critics, and scholars have all written about artists' deconstructions of Pacific stereotypes since the "Pacific art movement" began in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup>

Given that "identity" and "representation/re-presentation" are prominent issues in contemporary Oceanic art, it is a bit puzzling that more scholars do not engage in a dialogue that allows artists to identify and represent themselves. Engaging with a talking story methodology is certainly nothing new, however, its absence from scholarly literature discussing Oceanic art is conspicuous enough to create a gap this thesis contributes toward filling. When scholars have created space for Oceanic artists to speak for themselves they often focus narrowly on the artists' careers. The following paragraph points to two examples where data was collected from talking with artists, but a narrative, talking story presentation of the artists' lives was not a priority in the publication.

Separated by two decades but both published through the University of the South Pacific, Patricia Hereniko's *Pacific Artists* (1986) and Katherine Higgins' *Red Wave: Space, Process, and Creativity at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture* (2008) are examples of space being held for artists to tell their own stories but within a limited scope. *Pacific Artists* certainly deserves note because it is one of the first books to provide a venue for several Oceanic artists to talk about themselves and their work in their own words. However, though

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<sup>15</sup> Karen Stevenson (in 2004 and 2008) has referred to the increased visibility and recognition of contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand as a movement. In 1996 Nicholas Thomas also referred to the "contemporary migrant Polynesian art movement" in New Zealand ("Exhibit" 320).

the artists' words are written in paragraph form, they read more like lists than narratives. They are profiles of the artists' careers that follow a table presenting each person's date and place of birth, education, occupation, familial relations and connections to the arts. *Red Wave* is more narrative in nature with the book splitting its focus between setting the Oceania Centre apart from other environments contributing contemporary Oceanic art and marketing the work of selected artists in the Red Wave collective. Higgins narrates a brief history of the Oceania Centre and gives the reader an idea of the sights, sounds, and the experience of spending time at the Centre from her perspective as well as from some of the artists'. Higgins no doubt spent considerable time talking story with the artists while she was in residence amongst them, but the stories presented in the book mostly retrace the trajectories of their careers, are artist statements, or address specifically the impact Epeli Hau'ofa (the Centre's founder) had on the artists. *Red Wave* does place importance on having the artists talk for themselves, but it does not delve into seemingly unrelated anecdotes, which emerge from talking story, to present fuller pictures of the artists as multi-faceted human beings. After all, the story at the heart of the book, as the title would suggest, is about the contributions the Oceania Centre makes to contemporary Oceanic art.

However, Higgins' more recent scholarship seems to offer an even more engaging approach that also comes out of conversation. The article "Kamoan Mine," considers the concept of "Kamoan," a term coined by visual artist Andy Lelei'siuao, bringing together the terms "Kiwi" and "Samoan." The article refers to Lelei'siuao in the third person except when he is answering interview questions. However, Lelei'siuao is not just the subject of the paper and an interviewee; he is a co-author of the paper. This resembles what Alicia Partnoy calls "co/labor/actions: innovative, non-logocentric, non-hierarchical models of research, creative production, and action" (22). In "co/labor/actions" interview subjects appear with researchers as the owners of their experiences rather than the objects of interpretation. Had I

more time or more developed relationships with the artists involved in this project, this thesis may have risen to the level of co/labor/action.

Nonetheless, the thesis does offer a way to add dimension to descriptions of artists that are missing from books such as Anne D'Alleva's *Arts of the Pacific Islands*. Because Oceanic art is not part of the Western canon and the general public may not be familiar with Oceanic art from any period, books like this offer a useful overview. And because the overview moves from prehistory into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discussion on contemporary Oceanic art is necessarily only a small part of a larger view of activity in Oceania. However, in D'Alleva's chapter on "Tradition and Power in Contemporary Pacific Art" there is a section focusing on "The Role of the Artist." In this three-page section, D'Alleva gives a brief summary of the artistic training and influences on four artists (Hawaiian graphic artist Herman Pi'ikea Clark, Māori weaver Erenora Puke-tapu-Hetet, Solomon Islands painter Eddie Daiding Bibimaui, and i-Kiribati muralist Tekirau Urio). She draws attention to the artist's media of choice and describes and presents an illustration of one artwork per artist. Other than saying that Clark sees the role of the artist as communicator and repository of cultural knowledge, the significance of this section is unclear.

The following paragraph from D'Alleva's *Arts of the Pacific Islands*, published in 2010, resembles the approach found in the list-like text of Hereniko's 1986 *Pacific Artists*:

In Kiribati, the artist Tekiraua Urio also works within a Western idiom (FIG. 119) [119 in original text, figure not shown here]. Urio had no training before working as an artist, but later spent a ten-week period as artist-in-residence at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. His energetic figural style contrasts with the fine geometric patterning much more typical of Kiribati art traditions, especially two-dimensional design. He finds visual inspiration in films, advertisements, and other Western sources. Urio paints murals for a variety of patrons, including churches, the government, and merchants, and also paints gravestones with scenic images of fruits and flowers. Recently, he has begun to make easel paintings. (152)



There is a growing body of art historical writing like this paragraph that introduces the reader to an artist for the purpose of providing an example of a trend. D’Alleva’s paragraph on Urio illustrates an earlier point she makes in her discussion on change and continuity found in the work of contemporary Oceanic artists – Oceanic artists are using Western media. However, it does not speak to the section’s heading “The Role of the Artist.” If the role of the artist is as a communicator, as D’Alleva may be asserting, what the artist has to say and how the artist deemed that message important enough to communicate may be pertinent areas to investigate. Short introductions like this paragraph on Urio do not present enough information for the reader to understand what makes this artist an idiosyncratic individual.

One example that Karen Stevenson points to that does speak to idiosyncrasies and diversity of experience is Tai Mulitalo’s *My Own Shade of Brown*. Stevenson points out that because Mulitalo’s photographs are black and white, “the colourful gloss frequently associated with Pacific peoples is sidelined, and this enables us to direct our attention to the people themselves, not the stereotype” (*Frangipani* 138). While this is certainly true, I would add that what also enables the reader to focus on the people is that the text accompanying the photographs are narratives told by the people in the photographs in their own words. *My Own Shade of Brown* is part of *A Place In Time* documentary project, in which photography and oral history together express human experience through the words and images of those who have lived it. It was the narratives that allowed Stevenson to “hear their voices as they create their own representation” (*Frangipani* 138). Mulitalo not only took the photographs but also conducted oral history interviews, which were edited into narratives, resulting in what Glenn Busch (Mulitalo’s mentor during this project) calls “documentary writing.” Busch describes the book as a “collaboration between the Samoan participants and its Samoan author” that looks at difficulties in new beginnings (11 in Mulitalo). Stevenson refers to the work as “a series of photographs (combined with personal statements)”

(*Frangipani* 138). I see it as an example where talking story has contributed to contemporary Oceanic art engaging with the subtle complexities inherent in human experience.

Even though most scholars acknowledge that “identity” is a complex issue, the pluralities of identity seem to be missing from the discussion on the ways in which artists are creating their own representations. In discussions on contemporary Oceanic art the focus has largely been on ethnicity. Identity is not fully determined by ethnicity, gender, or class. In this thesis talking story has allowed for details, specificities, and complexities to create a more nuanced portrait of the artists through personal stories. The thesis goes beyond exploring how creative output contributes to identifying how one is viewed by the world, and instead considers how creative thinking can change one’s worldview. The narrative, biographical approach of talking story created opportunities for human-centred anecdotes to emerge. These stories not only present the participants as multi-faceted human beings, but they also reveal information about the artists’ creative processes not usually uncovered in literature which focuses narrowly on the trajectories of artists’ careers and deconstructs visual texts in their work. Looking into a work of art for the values of a culture in a time is an important investigation. If the artists are still alive, one way to add to our understanding is by revealing stories in their lived human experiences.

The notion of talking story has informed both the methodology and the final form of the thesis. The conversational writing style, which refers to the five participating artists by their first names and occasionally uses colloquialisms, allows the form of the thesis to parallel the “talking story” research process. “Academic language” is by no means universal or a homogenous construct.<sup>16</sup> Research in the humanities may exercise the most flexibility as

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<sup>16</sup> As with any “living” language “academic language” is also constantly changing and developing. For example, over time first-person pronoun use has become allowable in some disciplines. A Footnote continues on next page.

Sharon Parry has found that “the particularistic nature of research in humanities fields gives rise to unlimited diversity of style and form” (281). Knowledge can be communicated in both formal and informal ways.

### **ABOUT ART AND LIFE:**

During the semi-structured interviews with the artists we talked story about both art and life. “Art” is not always easy to define.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, art is a result of an artist’s impulse to create. But even this statement can be problematic when considering cultures where “artist” is not a recognised vocation. However, in contemporary Oceanic art, artists are recognised and the word “art” usually refers to a wide class of expressive forms and media, including performing arts, visual art, and literature. The five artists discussed here work in visual media, so “art” will usually refer to visual art. However, even though Ema Tavola is a visual artist, this thesis focuses on her curatorial practice more than her painting or textile practices. Creative expressions take many forms. My investigation into the artists’ lives and what they deemed important to talk about takes into consideration the notion that they are communicating ideas through their work. There are, of course, arguments that artwork does not begin with an artist’s idea but is instead something that flows through the artist or is the result of many layers of messages in the environment the artist receives without necessarily being conscious of. Based on the ways these artists discuss their work, it seems clear that their work is part of how they intentionally communicate.

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common mission across disciplines in the academy is to produce and communicate knowledge. Academic languages are highly discipline specific. However, as cross-, inter-, and multi-disciplinary research is encouraged across the academy, perhaps a greater appreciation may emerge for the individualistic and interpretive nature of the languages expressed in academe.

<sup>17</sup> See Belting for examples of how the concept of art has been subject to historical change. For complexities in the act of defining art see Davies, also Dickie.

Human beings gather information about the world around them. Inevitably there are gaps and parts that do not seem to make a whole. Creating art is one way to make meaning and reconcile disparities. This is also the work of life. As linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath puts it, art “functions to transport viewers and listeners outside themselves and beyond the immediacies of space and time” (133). In its ability to enable the human imagination to act “as if,” art can prompt us to respond by creating what is not yet there. I do not necessarily agree with Heath that “Art *always* pushes toward some sense of connection and completion” (emphasis added, 133), but it was a sense of connection which drew me to each of the five artists discussed in this thesis. When faced with disjunctures and disparities, in their own ways, these five artists have taken creative leaps, investigating what is not yet there and connecting it with what is.

This thesis speaks to the power art and artists can have to alter understandings. When an artwork is less about reproducing nature in an artistic vision and more about making a thought visible, examining how reality materialises in the mind of the individual seems like a good place to begin. Cognitive scientist Merlin Donald sees art first and foremost as, “an activity *intended to influence the minds of an audience*. It involves the deliberate construction of representations that affect how people (including the artist) view the world” (italics in original, 4). Even artists who claim they do not care how their work is read are presenting stimuli that affect the minds of an audience. Donald sees art as aimed at a “cognitive outcome,” meaning that art is “designed to engineer a state of mind in an audience (even in cases of extreme narcissism where the only intended audience is the artist)” (7). I am not sure the artists I study here would agree their work is necessarily “designed to engineer a state of mind,” but Donald’s argument is compelling. The social functions of works of art ranging from cathedrals to films are cognitive: “they influence memory, shape public behaviour, set social norms, and modify the experience of life in their audiences”

(Donald 7). Even if the artists participating in this thesis did not intend cognitive outcomes, their work modified my experience of contemporary Oceanic art by changing my mind about the ways I view existing presuppositions particularly in Oceanic studies. Because creating space for paradigms to shift has a cognitive outcome, the thesis also values cognitive scientists' views on human creativity.

Because this thesis looks at not only the art but also the lives of the participating artists, one of the participants interpreted the project as being more in the realm of anthropology than art history. Both art and self-reflexivity are phenomena unique to human beings, so in a sense, the thesis is an investigation into the study of humankind. But in talking story about art and life with five creative thinkers, the thesis seeks to examine the power artists and their work have on shaping how people make sense of their lives. The emphasis is on the artists and their creative processes. Merlin Donald, whose focus within cognitive science is particularly engaged with cultural evolution, describes artists as having always been "society's early warning devices. The best of them are connected and more deeply enculturated than most" (14). If this is true, then any worthy study into human societies and cultures (anthropology) should instead overlap into the realm of art history.

Throughout the artists' stories, art and self-reflexivity intertwine. I return to Merlin Donald on how the connection between the two insists on a cognitive outcome:

The artistic object compels reflection on the very process that created it – that is, on the mind of the artist, and thus of the society from which the artist emerged. Ultimately, art derives from the innate human capacity for self-observation. That is why art has been so instrumental in defining cultural periods and in providing tribes, of whatever size and complexity, with their self-identifying symbols and allegories. (5)

## **NARRATIVES OF**

Narrative is the most appropriate vehicle for inquiry for this thesis because I asked the participating artists to explain things they may not even be aware they are doing. Therefore, it was difficult for them to come up with an explanation when put on the spot. For example,

when I asked Brett Graham directly about his creative processes, his response was, “It’s not like I’m sitting around thinking, man, I’m so creative.” But when I asked him to tell me about specific instances when he did things differently from the way others had he recounted stories that opened pathways into understanding his creative processes. As Clandinin and Connolly explain:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interactions with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. (20)

Narrative inquiry focuses on human knowledge more than the collection of data. It has been used by psychologists looking at how stories affect people’s lives, sociologists interested in how storying constructs identities or also how narratives make meaning of personal lives, autoethnographers who write stories of their own experiences, and anthropologists explaining communities through the life histories of its members.<sup>18</sup> For me, narrative inquiry has been a means to access knowledge in stories – stories that make up the life form that made the artwork, stories that glimpse into the imaginations of people who transform materials and challenge the status quo.

The narratives are not just telling stories; they are producing and sharing knowledge and they are standing as documents to history. Joel Fineman views the anecdote, a narration of a singular event, as “the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact” (67). The narratives speak to both personal and theoretical histories that are bound to the present. They express concerns that relate to contemporary Oceanic art in Aotearoa New Zealand today. And they are overwriting centuries of misrepresentation of indigenous cultures and peoples of Oceania, whether the noble savage in an earthly paradise, the ignoble savage of violent tempests, the dying savage of a colonial outpost, or more recent characterisations of Oceanic peoples made

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<sup>18</sup> For more on those uses of narrative inquiry see Clandinin.

by law enforcement, educational institutions, social services agencies, and the media. The narrative stories in this thesis hold a space for human experiences to be told from the subjective point of view and in the words of the person undergoing them.

The usefulness of the stories is in their capacity to gain insight from the artists' lives, transfer that knowledge, provoke dialogue, and to inspire readers to reflect on their own experiences. The stories they have chosen to tell me are important to them. Seemingly unrelated anecdotes are sometimes the twists and turns in narrative that are left out when a person's career or life is retraced in a straight line. In telling a story about something that happened, an event is not just something that happens to a person but becomes something a person responds to and makes meaning of. This act of meaning making also contributes to understanding how the thought processes of the artists lead to creative interpretations of problems and solutions.

The stories presented in this thesis are powerful in their own discourse, but they have been taken out of context – changed from an interview format to a narrative. While composing narratives that flow, the priorities of the biographical sections were to stay true to each artist's voice, to remain faithful to what the participant said, and include artwork relevant to stories. Focusing on and highlighting the personal narrative allows the reader to consider thoughts, responses, and insights, which outside of life writing research may not be recognised as knowledge. The narrative approach also allows readers, who do not share a cultural background to the storyteller, to develop an understanding of the artists' perspectives from within a narrative format. Each chapter ends with a first-person anecdote or series of anecdotes to emphasise that the personal stories are not subordinate to theory.

In the process of talking story about art and life the artists shared narratives that not only reflect the past, but also shape the present, as the act of talking about oneself is also about creating oneself. Arthur Bochner describes personal narrative as being “part of the human,

existential struggle to move life forward” (Ellis and Bochner 746). Reflecting on the past reveals possibilities for the present and future. The stories that follow are anecdotes in moments of time that frame an investigation of the lives of each artist. The narrative mirrors the creative output of each of the artists – an attempt to move life forward.

## **CONTEMPORARY**

It is not within the purview of this thesis to discuss the divide between Oceanic “heritage” and “contemporary” arts. If a work is created in a particular present moment, I consider it to be contemporary regardless of stylistic considerations. In the “present moment” of this thesis, all of the participants are actively engaged in their artistic practices.

## **OCEANIC**

The choice to use “Oceanic” rather than “Pacific” comes from the impact of Epeli Hau‘ofa’s essay “Our Sea of Islands.” Hau‘ofa’s seminal essay, written in 1993, presents a vision of Oceania that the author describes as “new and optimistic” (2). Observations of “ordinary people” in the region informed Hau‘ofa’s view, as opposed to government officials, academics, consultants, representatives of business communities or lending organisations, most of whom, until that time, bound the notions of smallness and dependence to Pacific island nations. Hau‘ofa himself propagated the perspective of poorly resourced, isolated islands that needed international aid. But there came a point when he could no longer participate in the transmission of these discouraging ideas. He could not face his students without hope for the future because he realised that propagating a view of hopelessness was also an act of belittlement. Even if Hau‘ofa could not come up with solutions to the realities of financial dependence many island nations experienced, he did not want that deterministic view to go unchecked. He could no longer perpetuate these pervasive, derogatory views because he knew they had “the power to inflict lasting damage on people’s images of



themselves and on their ability to act with relative autonomy in their endeavours to survive reasonably well within the international system in which they have found themselves” (4).

Instead, Hau‘ofa chose to combat the idea of smallness. He looked to myths, legends, oral traditions, and cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania. He found that the region was not small. His Oceanic ancestors were limited only by imagination:

their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. (7)

Hau‘ofa’s view of Oceania was one of the first to offer an alternative to the derogatory and belittling views of indigenous cultures. He recognised that, “Belittlement in whatever guise, if internalised for long and transmitted across generations, may lead to moral paralysis, to apathy, to the kind of fatalism we can see among our fellow human beings who have been herded and confined to reservations or internment camps” (6).

Ending belittlement does not begin by changing the attitudes and behaviours of others; it begins with decolonising one’s own mind. If a person, or a people, is repeatedly told they are not good enough or worthy, they are likely to internalise the belief. They then behave in ways that perpetuate the belief. This is nothing new.<sup>19</sup> But in 1993, “Our Sea of Islands” shifted a paradigm. Scholars and artists took to heart Hau‘ofa’s imperative to overturn hegemony. The essay ends:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom. (16)

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Said, also Freidan.

For Hau‘ofa, the term “Oceania,” as opposed to “Pacific Islands,” connotes islands and peoples connected by a vast expanse – an expanse that is home to a population of people he refers to as “Oceanians.” Oceania is an expanse that was explored, traversed, and navigated by seafaring people of Oceania. The ocean connects cultures and allows for exchange. “Oceania” implies “a sea of islands,” whereas, for Hau‘ofa, the term “Pacific Islands” points to “islands in a far sea” – a vast sea, separating tiny, isolated spaces, contributing to the image of smallness.

Hau‘ofa reframes migration by presenting the movement out of the region as a way for Oceanic peoples to get in touch with their human need to move and enlarge their bases of available resources, instead of a necessity due to national poverty. According to Hau‘ofa, the imaginary lines drawn across the sea by 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial powers “confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces for the first time” (7). Boundaries can make traversing the ocean more difficult, and the idea of boundaries can also have a confining effect. But as technological advances and globalisation have made international travel more accessible, the people of Oceania have created their own lines across the ocean connecting their sea of islands with metropolitan centres around the globe. Social scientists may see this movement as a result of the tiny islands being too poor, but Hau‘ofa sees the movement as a way for people, who were historically mobile, to participate again in enlarging their worlds by expanding social networks. And with this idea of expansion Hau‘ofa also reframes remittances through the lens of reciprocal exchange rather than one of dependence. Oceania is not confined even by the Pacific Ocean. Diasporic communities around the world continue to enlarge Oceania. And even without taking the diaspora into account, Hau‘ofa points out that when the Exclusive Economic Zones are taken into measure, so-called tiny island nations are actually amongst the largest countries in the world.

“Our Sea of Islands” was Hau‘ofa’s imperative call to overturn hegemony. Heeding Hau‘ofa’s directive to wake up to the truth and liberate ourselves, is to also recognise Bob Marley’s imperative (inspired by a speech by Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey) to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because “none but ourselves can free our minds.” When artists’ work has cognitive outcomes that have the potential to liberate viewers from mental slavery by shifting paradigms, we owe it to ourselves to learn as much as we can about and from them.

Referring to all five of the artists participating in this thesis as “Oceanic” reflects the impact of Hau‘ofa’s essay. It also reflects my own international view of Aotearoa New Zealand as part of Oceania, a view not historically shared by New Zealand scholars examining Oceanic art. For example, Caroline Vercoe has noted that international exhibitions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have created space for “Pacific art” and “Māori art” to cross the divide that separates them in New Zealand:

International exhibitions ‘Paradise Now?’ (2004) at the Asia Society Museum in New York and ‘Pasifika Styles’ (2006-08) at the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University have created a wider framework, clearly locating New Zealand within the Pacific. The juxtaposition of Maori and Pacific art together with no explicit distinction, allowed for works to be evaluated away from the usual binary in which they are most often contextualised in New Zealand. A number of reviews of ‘Paradise Now?’, for instance, made links between the work of John Pule and Shane Cotton, something that is very rarely seen in New Zealand art writing. (774)

In New Zealand, “Pacific art” generally refers to art created by Pacific peoples or people of Pacific Islands heritage, as distinct from Māori. For most New Zealand scholars focusing on either “contemporary Pacific art” or “contemporary Māori art,” ethnicity is key to the parameters of their study. The categories are separate from one another, despite several artists coming from bi- or multi-cultural backgrounds including Māori and other Oceanic cultures. Of course, as tangata whenua (people of the land), Māori occupy a distinctly different position in Aotearoa New Zealand to that of other Oceanic peoples. It is not my

intention to conflate the two. However, Aotearoa New Zealand was part of Oceania well before international exhibitions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This thesis embraces Hau'ofa's view of Oceania – a sea of islands, which includes Aotearoa New Zealand. The thesis and its participating artists look beyond the (New Zealand) “Pacific artist” label and toward an interconnected, inclusive Oceania. “Our Sea of Islands” was a stone cast into a pond and its effects continue to undulate throughout the oceans. Choosing to refer to all of the artists participating in this thesis as “Oceanic” is one tiny ripple.

## **ARTISTS AND THEIR WORK**

One transcendent function art (not often) has is the capacity to shift perceptions of the world around us. The work and stories of, and time spent with, John Ioane, Ema Tavola, Brett Graham, Robin White, and Siliga David Setoga shifted how I perceive the world around me, including aspects of contemporary Oceanic art. I asked these five artists to participate because with all of them three factors were present: I wanted to know more about them as people, I wanted to know more about their work, and I felt that establishing personal rapport with them was possible. Being able to establish personal rapport was important to the chosen methodology. I wanted to know more about their work because they were each contributing to contemporary Oceanic art in ways that were not widely discussed at the time this project began. I wanted to know more about them as people because something in their words and/or work seemed to speak to transformation. I did not know what that aspect of “transformation” was, but, to me, each of the participants seemed to be able to think new thoughts and know that any present reality is not static. This ability is particularly important because, as Salman Rushdie writes, “those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts” (17).

More about the backgrounds of the artists can be found in the chapters dedicated to each of them. The second sections of those chapters provide background information to an issue or theoretical concept that emerged as important. The following paragraphs briefly introduce why those topics were chosen.

The true art of living, for John, is taking care of the *vā* or the space between himself and others. Therefore, the notion of *vā*, important to many Oceanic cultures, is presented in the second section of Chapter Ioane in this thesis. In a personal communication with Ron Brownson, John has commented, “Aotearoa New Zealand is my soil, Sāmoa is my spirit, the *vā* is my home” (*Home AKL* 43). This conversation took place after *vā* had already emerged as the topic for the second section of Chapter Ioane in this thesis. However, if one can accept the reality that time is not linear, this statement is the reason I chose *vā*.

While much of the scholarly discourse around contemporary Oceanic art focuses on how contemporary artwork is changing how viewers not from the region perceive Oceania and its peoples, Ema Tavola’s work as a curator and gallery director aims to create “brown spaces” where community members can reflect on different facets of Oceanic experiences. Ema worked as a curator and gallery director through a mandate to serve the community. This unusual model for a gallery allowed Ema to privilege art from South Auckland for Fresh Gallery Otara’s South Auckland audience. Ema’s working model served the diaspora of Oceanic communities in South Auckland as well as fine-art-buying gallery visitors from both within and outside the community. Even though Ema welcomed young students who wanted to hang out in the gallery after school and their grandmothers who quizzically spied the gallery on their way through the shops, she also sold numerous pieces of fine art. Ema’s curatorial practice has blazed its own trail negotiating community service and the demands of fine art. Instead of creating a cold, white box gallery, she considered the importance of presenting “brown art” in “brown spaces” as opposed to the more familiar instances of brown

art in white spaces. Therefore, the second section in Chapter Tavola takes a brief look at the notion of “brown spaces” in Oceanic curatorial practices.

In Aoteroa New Zealand “Māori art” and “Pacific art” generally occupy distinctly separate spaces. Because Brett Graham is celebrated as a contemporary Māori artist, the extent to which his work connects, rather than separates, Māori and Pacific cultures and histories is not necessarily the focus of art historians writing about contemporary Māori art or contemporary “Pacific” art. In one of our talking story sessions, Brett mentioned Maui, a trickster figure found in many parts of Oceania. As the youngest child in his family, Brett says he often looked to Maui stories for redemption. In Māori versions of Maui stories he is also the youngest child, becoming for Brett the saving grace for all youngest children misbehaving. Because Brett reveres Maui who, as half human and half god, was also in a unique position to connect two worlds, and because Brett also enjoys subverting established systems, the second section in Chapter Graham looks into trickster stories. I perceived Brett as a trickster of sorts in his interaction with me during the interviews. This is another reason trickster is particularly linked to Chapter Graham.

Robin White’s contribution to contemporary Oceanic art is not often taken into account and examined because “Pacific artists” are most often recognised by ethnicity. Robin was known as a New Zealand painter before she moved to Kiribati in 1982. She was invited to show work at the first Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) in 1993 and then again in 2009. During the second visit participating at the APT, Robin observed that through the years she moved from looking at the Pacific from the outside in, to experiencing it, along with her collaborators, from the inside out. Robin’s life in Kiribati and collaborations with i-Kiribati and Māori weavers and Tongan and Fijian barkcloth makers shifts a pattern of thinking away from considering “insiders” and “outsiders,” which occupies so much space in Oceanic studies, to finding instead unity in diversity. To give an idea of what Robin’s collaborative

paradigm moves beyond, the second section in Chapter White explores insider/outsider discourse in Oceanic studies.

Siliga David Setoga's approach to presenting solutions is by raising questions not dictating answers. He creates gallery installations and also produces T-shirts. He is the son of a preacher and he criticises the Sāmoan New Zealand leaders of the church, while continuing to attend services. Scholarly discourse around contemporary Oceanic artwork often extracts meaning through postcolonial frameworks. Instead of focusing on hegemonic systems put in place by Pākehā<sup>20</sup> New Zealanders, Siliga questions actions of those within his own communities. By questioning conventions within his own culture he is also strengthening its core. Because a major cultural construct Siliga investigates is fa'a Sāmoa, the second section in Chapter Setoga discusses some of the main aspects that make up fa'a Sāmoa.

John Ioane, Ema Tavola, Brett Graham, Robin White, and Siliga David Setoga are carving out space for a more creative awareness of Oceania and Oceanic art. By presenting their stories here, this thesis contributes to validating the work and experiences of Oceanic artists, while speaking to the pluralities of identity and complicating the labels of "Pacific Art" and "Pacific Artist," specifically in Aotearoa New Zealand. The participants' abilities to challenge and cross boundaries are unique, which is why the thesis celebrates their personal idiosyncracies and includes only a few reproductions of works created by each of the artists. For the purposes of this investigation, the space for their biographies and narratives is more important than creating a catalogue of their work. The biographical, narrative approach

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<sup>20</sup> Pākehā is a word of Māori origin that is widely used in New Zealand to refer to New Zealanders of non-Māori, (white) European extraction or to describe things in white settler New Zealand society.

allows a glimpse into some aspects of how these five people have come to express their unique voices. Their artistic practices are part of larger stories.

In *The Frangipani is Dead*, Karen Stevenson says she saw in the work of the Oceanic artists a “need to tell their stories” (133). The stories she is referring to include “stories that address cultural and social conflicts; stories of suicide and of a necessary balance; stories that enable the assertion of their own identity” (132). Stevenson writes about how selected works critique and dispel stereotypes, speak to reality, confront the viewer, offer a voice to the underrepresented, and create opportunities for members of the viewing public to reflect upon important themes. Inspired by the work of Mallon and Pereira, this thesis is creating space for the stories in the artists’ lives to make an impact along side the stories told about their work. In doing so, it builds on art historians’ interpretations of the stories in the artists’ work. More importantly, this thesis creates a textual venue for the artists to tell their own stories in their own words.



## Chapter Ioane

“Art is beside the point.”

--John Ioane

### STORIES OF JOHN

John Ioane describes himself as a New Zealand-born Sāmoan who spent his earliest formative years in Sāmoa. His parents, Sosefine and Sefulu, were acquainted with one another in their homeland, but they did not become a couple until they met again in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> They returned to Sāmoa for a while until Sefulu started teaching in Christchurch, New Zealand. John was born in Christchurch, but before his first birthday the family moved back to Sāmoa. One memory John has of those formative years in Sāmoa has had a profound impact on how he thinks about his own creativity.

*I lived in a village where there were lots of pigs, chickens, and dogs. There were lots of families around and bush. There was no TV. There were no movie posters or any photographs, magazines, or posters to do with science fiction. There was nothing like that. I didn't have any visual encouragement in terms of science fiction, but I had a dream where I was holding a ray gun from a spaceship. I remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday.*

*I dreamed I was playing with my cousin, running around my grandfather's pick-up truck, playing like cowboys chasing each other. And I had a ray gun from a spaceship, and I was shooting my cousin with the ray gun. We were just playing and laughing. Then in that dawn between asleep and awake, that half-sleep where one foot is in that world and*

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<sup>21</sup> After World War II until 1962 when Sāmoa (then Western Sāmoa) gained independence, (Western) Sāmoa was a United Nations Trust Territory under the administration of New Zealand. Therefore, there were few restrictions over movement between (Western) Sāmoa and New Zealand. When (Western) Sāmoa gained independence, a Treaty of Friendship was signed with New Zealand, which included a provision for a quota of Sāmoans to be allowed residency in New Zealand each year. In the 1950s and '60s New Zealand encouraged labour migration from Pacific island nations to fill New Zealand's manufacturing labour shortage (Bedford, Ho, and Lidgard 16-17).

*the other foot is in this world, I remember I didn't want to lose my ray gun. My mum was sitting up next to me in the fale.<sup>22</sup> I knew I was coming out of sleep and I wanted to keep my gun, so I asked my mum in Sāmoan, "Mum, hold my gun." In my head I knew I was going to come out of my dream and it would all be finished. So I wanted to take my ray gun out of my dream world into the real world because it was so cool. I wanted to keep it, so I said to my mum, obviously with nothing in my hand, "Mum, hold my ray gun." I handed her my gun, and she just pretended to take it. When I came to and woke up, I asked for my gun and she said it was a dream, and I was sad.*

*I think that was the only dream I remember from my childhood under six years old, and it was a big influence on me. As an adult looking back I was surprised at how I came up with the idea that I was holding a ray gun from a spaceship. I was just a typical Sāmoan boy in Sāmoa, who had never seen movies or been to a theatre. This was Sāmoa in the 1960s. How could a young Sāmoan boy in the '60s know what a spaceship is or a ray gun or any of that sci-fi stuff? I wouldn't have seen any science fiction books or magazines. But I knew it was a ray gun from a spaceship that shot lasers. That dream I had as a five-year old or a four-year old was a big influence. I have had, of course, other influences as an adult, but to me that was the most profound influence that I'll always remember.*

*It is because of that dream that I'm not surprised when I do wonderful things in my life. Occasionally I do these amazing things and it doesn't surprise me. That made me believe in a wisdom, that I know more than I think I know. It's such a cliché, but it's true. What I see and what I experience and what I understand is only a drop in the bucket. To have the faith and the courage to leap over that, to believe religiously, is a wisdom that is*

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<sup>22</sup> The literal translation of fale is usually accepted as "house." Fale refers to a Sāmoan house, usually in an oval or circular shape with open sides and wooden posts holding up a domed, thatched roof.

*as great as the ocean. It takes courage, especially in days of mechanisms of logic and reason to believe in something that is beyond my perception. But I can because that's what happened to me when I was four or five in that dream. It was over a stupid ray gun, but that stupid ray gun made me think about the greater picture and understand that there is greatness in things beyond our perception.*

When John was six years old, in the late 1960s, the family moved to Hamilton, New Zealand. John did not speak a word of English. He felt like a child explorer in a strange land. "Everything was weird to me, especially the people." At first he thought that Māori were Sāmoan, and he soon came to realise that a lot of Hamiltonians had never met a "Pacific Islander" before. They had read about Polynesians in the newspapers, but it was not good news. John had a lot of fights in those early days. He recalls them now with a sense of humour:

*In my first fight I wasn't actually doing the fighting. It was within my first year there, so I was six going on seven-years old. I was catching the bus with all the other kids to go to school, and a tall blonde girl beat me up because I ignored her. She was asking me questions. I didn't speak any English, and in Sāmoa it is disrespectful to look at a person directly. We have a look where you're not looking at the person. She was looking at me, and I had that look. She thought I was being disrespectful by not looking at her, and she gave me a hiding in the line as we were waiting for the bus. That was my first contact. It was good. Now I'm dating tall Palagi<sup>23</sup> girls.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Palagi refers to people of (white) European extraction, or things Western, in Sāmoan.

<sup>24</sup> In a recent email, John reminded me that he married one of the tall Palagi girls he dated, and they had a family together.

To make sense of his new environment, John would draw everything he thought was strange – trains, helicopters, houses – everything that was unfamiliar. He wanted to copy them and study them as a way of understanding his new environment. This graphic nature stayed with him, and in 1985 he gained a BFA from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland, where he focused mainly on painting.<sup>25</sup> Shortly after graduation, John had his first solo show.<sup>26</sup> Fatu Feu‘u, who has been recognised as the “father” of contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand (Stevenson, *Frangipani* 46), suggested John have a solo show at Samoa House/Maota Samoa.<sup>27</sup> John considers that solo show, in 1988, his first real public outing as an artist, but he left most things up to Fatu to arrange. He was quite involved with rugby,<sup>28</sup> he had a busy life with his partner at the time and their child. He sent Fatu some paintings for the exhibition, but John says he did not (and does not) take the idea of being an “Artist,” with a capital A, so seriously. Fatu organised the exhibition and also decided to call John “Ioane Ioane.” “Ioane” is a Sāmoan transliteration of “John,” and John thought the reduplication was beautiful so he let it go. “Ioane Ioane” was on the poster for the exhibition. Some still refer to John as Ioane Ioane, but John decided to go back to using

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<sup>25</sup> John was the first Sāmoan graduate from Elam. I suspect this was often pointed out in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. The written materials for the exhibition *Three Polynesian Artists* (25 July – 28 August, 1990, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch) mention the fact. It is also pointed out in “Samoan Artists” in *Art and Asia Pacific* (Feu‘u). When I asked John how he felt about having that label placed on him, this was his reply: “I never think about it. It’s funny that other people make a thing about it, which is cool, but for me it was just going to a school and getting out. I just so happen to be the first one there. It’s not a big deal to me.”

<sup>26</sup> Stack Gallery, Mt. Eden, Auckland, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Fatu Feu‘u was also the principal founder of the artists’ co-op and gallery Samoa House/Maota Samoa, which was also known as Tautai Gallery and would eventually become Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust (in 1995).

<sup>28</sup> John was a high achiever in rugby for quite some time. He was the representative at West Auckland secondary schools, Auckland Rugby Union Under 20s, and Thames Valley Rugby Union senior representative.

his birth name in 1990. He says that, in part, it was his way of resisting being swept up by what would become a “Pacific Art Renaissance.”

*I saw from the mid '80s, once Tautai was established and Fatu started to work and become more exposed with his work, I saw a lot of people just hopping on the bandwagon of Pacific rebirth – this “renaissance” thing of synthesising the traditional and the contemporary. I saw a lot of shit; you know, people creating just because it was the flavour of the month. I didn’t want to become involved with that, so I decided to pull away from it. I ran away to Thames for eight years with my family to get away from the “renaissance” thing.<sup>29</sup> And that’s why I changed my name back to John Ioane. Well, my birth certificate says John Ioane.*

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<sup>29</sup> John objects to the very notion of a “Pacific Art Renaissance.” In his 2008 talk “There is No Such Thing as a Pacific Island Renaissance” he explained that “renaissance” means “rebirth” and something has to die to be reborn. Pacific art never died, so there has been no rebirth. As a metaphor, “renaissance” is used to describe a cultural revival, referencing the revival of art and literature under the influence of classical models in 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. The referent of “Pacific Renaissance” ranges from a rapidly growing Oceanic arts scenes to cultural revival as political protest. George Lewis, for example, refers to the “Hawaiian Renaissance” as a “social protest movement” (168). Stewart Firth describes Pacific studies programmes in Hawai‘i as projects of cultural renaissance, meaning they aim to “reclaim, disinter, rediscover, and reassert cultural identity” (140). Artistic heritage did play an important role in reasserting national identities after the Second World War, as Oceanic nations were moving toward and gaining independence. One important result of cultural revival that gains prominence to the point of being called a “renaissance” is popular, media, and state awareness of a culture. However, as Lily George observed during and following the Māori cultural renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps an unintended consequence “was that Māori multiplicity was minimised, while their homogeneity was emphasised” (435). In her discussion about the ways the Māori cultural renaissance diminished expressions of Māori multiplicity George noticed an “oppressive authenticity” (a phrase borrowed from Sissons) by which authenticity was determined by people who wrote about indigenous cultures and histories, and those who did not adhere to “the popular rendition of indigenous identity markers” were considered inauthentic (443). In the 1980s and 1990s along with the waves of Oceanic cultural revivals came academic discussions defining “authentic” and “inauthentic” cultures and discussions about the “invention” of culture or tradition. Even though, as Jocelyn Linnekin explains, the notion of cultural construction, as introduced by Roy Wagner in his 1975 book *The Invention of Culture*, proposed “dynamic, real-time production of culture as a universal human activity” in contrast to prior anthropological notions of unchanging indigenous societies (253), for many, “invention” suggested “inauthentic” thus becoming inflammatory. The use of the word “renaissance” is metaphoric and Ioane’s objection is literal, however, it is possible that artists and others were uncomfortable with scholars’ metaphorical writing about a “Pacific renaissance” for many reasons: talking about culture can be controversial, academics making assertions about culture can seem patronising, increased visibility also brought “oppressive authenticity” as well as what some (like John and Ema in this Footnote continues on next page.

John has recently returned to exhibiting as and referring to himself as Ioane Ioane, so from this point forward, the thesis will also use Ioane Ioane. Ioane's full birth name is John Herbert Sefulu Ioane. He is named after his maternal grandfather Herbert, whom Ioane points out was Palagi,<sup>30</sup> and Sefulu is Ioane's father. The word "sefulu" means "ten" in Sāmoan.

*After my dad was born, his mum was in the hospital with him, and his dad was away somewhere when the registrar wanted to know the name of the baby. One of the registrars was, as you are, too lazy to wait for the baby's father to come and give the name. The registrar just wrote down "ten" in the blank for the name. His name is "ten/sefulu" because he was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November. That's how my father got his name Sefulu. But his father really wanted to call him Isaiah, so my father's name is Sefulu Isaiah Ioane. I thought it was cute, a registrar who was impatient.*

Ioane's father and uncles used to take him along on fishing outings. He remembers having only fish to play with inside the boat. Ioane's painting *Va'a* (Figure 1) depicts the

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thesis) considered superficial Oceanic art. On the other hand, most art historians referring to Oceanic cultural revivals as a Pacific art renaissance were/are celebrating the resurgence in popularity of many forms of creative expression in the region and aim to further cultivate appreciation for the arts and cultures of Oceania. Their writing likely helped generate enthusiasm for Oceanic arts and cultures. As appreciation for Oceanic art has grown, so too has the art market that supports practising artists. The so-called Pacific art renaissance can be considered a factor that contributed to John Ioane becoming a full-time artist. So, it is interesting that he rejects the notion of a Pacific art renaissance and also rejects the label of "Artist," but as he has told me about other things, he makes no apologies for embodying both sides of a dichotomy. When art historians have written about the phenomenon of "the Pacific renaissance," they have often overlooked the ambivalence felt by some artists who are contributing to that "renaissance." A full discussion of the intellectual history and complexities that arise when considering the phrase "Pacific art renaissance" is not a priority of this thesis. The thesis chooses to provide space for Ioane's underrepresented opinion that there is no such thing as a Pacific art renaissance because Oceanic art never died.

<sup>30</sup> Ioane grew up thinking that his mother's father was of European ancestry but was later told that Herbert was not his mother's biological father, so then Ioane thought he was full blood quantum Sāmoan. His mother recently informed him that Herbert was her biological father so Ioane is of both Sāmoan and Palagi heritage. Ioane talked about how he felt "discovering" he was full-blooded Sāmoan in *Speaking in Colour*. Now that he has "rediscovered" his Palagi heritage, he does not see it as an issue anymore. He says, "It will never be settled and I don't worry about it anymore. I'm just me, whatever I am."

view a small child would have from the inside a fishing boat. The perspective is from close to the floor at one end of the boat. The other end looks a distance away. One fish lies on the floor of the vessel. The sky is light, but the sun is not yet overhead. Siapo (barkcloth) adds texture to the inside of the vessel and plays with how the surfaces absorb and reflect light. Ioane wanted to create a three-dimensional field. He chose to apply siapo because there was an abundance of it around him, and he wanted to use a material that was of him and part of his family history and culture. When Ioane created *Va'a* in 1984, he introduced siapo to his teachers and classmates at Elam, not knowing how quickly it would become common to find barkcloth from all over Oceania in New Zealand.



**Figure 1**  
**Ioane Ioane**  
***Va'a***  
**1984**  
**Acrylic on siapo on board**  
**1200x1720 mm**  
**Author's photograph**  
**Collection of the James Wallace Arts Trust**

Ioane focused on painting in art school but soon moved beyond the flat surface of the canvas. He moved from creating depth and texture on the canvas with siapo and other media to carving wood and creating multi-media installations that sculpt space and layer sounds. The sacred space he created through light- and sound-scapes mingling around wooden carved cowrie shells and monumental totems in *Fale Sā* (Figure 2) has been described as an icon of Polynesian creativity in Aotearoa (Oberg 10). As the viewer walks amongst the leaning and spiralling totems, the kinaesthetic experience engages visual and auditory senses. The dappled lighting, oceanic soundscape, and organic wooden sculptures create an environment where the viewer can feel transported into a sacred space. In 1999, when the work was first shown in a gallery, Ioane also created an opportunity to counter the view of art as a commodity.



**Figure 2**  
**Ioane Ioane**  
***Fale Sā***  
**1999**  
**Oregon pine, Douglas fir, macrocarpa, metallic paint, shells**  
**Shown at Whangarei Art Museum, 2009**  
**Author's photograph**  
**Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Friends of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2002**



*The idea of Fale Sā was a gift to the [Auckland] city workers in the morning. A friend and I got up at five o'clock one morning and filled his van with all the [wooden carved] shells. We went along Queen Street, K Road, and Ponsonby Road, and casually placed the shells on the streets for the workers or whoever. When they came out of their homes they would see these gifts to take – a gift for no reason, like love for no reason. I wanted it to be like the beach, where you walk and see a shell and go, "Oh, that's beautiful!" and take it with you. I wanted it to be natural. No tricks, no cameras, no documentary. I didn't even document it. Just nature. And funnily, the area of today's Queen Street used to be under an ocean hundreds of years ago.*

*The installation was created for a small gallery space, but the space and the form I'm talking with and to is greater than that. The gallery was pissed off that I was giving away artwork that cost money. That was my way of also saying that art should not be seen as a commodity. I still go to barbeques and parties even ten years later, and I see my shells in the homes of strangers. And other strangers come up to me and ask, "Are you the guy? I got one of your shells." That's a beautiful way of meeting and knowing people. Very idealistic, but I love it. (See Figure 3 for an image of the wooden cowrie shells, in this case part of Malosi not Fale Sā.)*

*If I wanted to make money, I would be more of a businessman like Fatu or Michel Tuffery. In a way one might say that I'm not well off like the others because I don't take art seriously, but that's not my point. I don't do it for money. It helps, but it's not why I live. And if I sell work, good. And if I don't, good. It's more about soul. That's pretty naïve, and I don't care.*

*I'm not really into the art, even when I'm doing it. I don't really understand what the whole thing is about – the arts, art, the notion of art. I know artists who talk about their work as if it was a machine that needs this and that and this. But for me it's a ritual.*



**Figure 3**  
**Ioane Ioane**  
*Malosi (Strength)*  
 1997  
 Douglas Fir, Oregon pine, and slate  
 2100x360x60 mm  
 Shown at Whangarei Art Musuem, 2009.  
 Author's photograph  
 Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,  
 purchased in 1997.

*Art is beside the point, but to be accessible I have to say, "I'm an artist, and this is what I do. This is a sculpture, this is a painting, that's called performance." But that's only to be accessible to people. I'm less accessible when I say it's a ritual for me, just like having a cigarette. I'm about soulful living. It's a cliché, but it's true.*

*One of my colleagues is quite famous and should, in my mind, understand that art is not an activity that one does outside of oneself. So I asked her to help me christen a group exhibition. I was going to approach the gallery from outside, so I asked her to turn the sound on as soon as I left. The music would create the ambience to insulate and prepare the space.*

*She didn't get it. She waited until I opened the door, and then she turned the music on. To her it was music. To me it wasn't. It was a christening. The music was holy water in the form of sound. To her it was just music. After she turned it on, I closed the door again, waited, then opened the door and began the christening. I told her afterwards, it's not a performance. It's real, like lifting the tapu.<sup>31</sup> It's not a performance. If you don't insulate the space before I come, it's just an act. The christening makes the space special. Otherwise it's just a concrete floor and walls.*

The blessing for the gallery opening Ioane recalls above took place at ASA Gallery in Auckland. An image of that particular event was not available. The image in Figure 4 shows Ioane blessing an opening in Rarotonga. It gives an indication of the atmosphere he creates. He makes an entrance, after the music starts, and moves deliberately through the space. Some of the movements look choreographed, which may lead viewers to think they are watching a performance. Ioane is performing a ritual, but it is not a “performance.”



**Figure 4**  
**Ioane Ioane at**  
**“Art by the Lagoon”**  
**Arorangi, Rarotonga**  
**2012**  
**Photograph courtesy of**  
**Niki Hastings-McFall**

<sup>31</sup> The noun form of the Māori word tapu is usually glossed as restriction, prohibition, or a supernatural condition. Something is “restricted” because it is in the sphere of the sacred. Williams states, “As a rule, elaborate ceremonies were necessary to remove tapu” (385).

Research on talking story discusses events between two or more people, but probably the stories we tell ourselves, more than anything else, determine how we experience our lives.

The stories Ioane creates have led to his philosophy that life is beautiful “even when it’s fucked up, life is beautiful.” Ioane finds beauty in life even out of the experience of losing a son. He created two identical sculptures, each named after his twin sons Keoni and Kawela.

*I did two of them. Kawela is standing up in a park in Glen Innes, commissioned by the City Council. And Keoni is always in a museum. It’s interesting. Keoni is in the museum because it hasn’t sold. It has been very close to being sold, but it hasn’t. I created both at the same time. What is really interesting is not the fact that it hasn’t been sold for the selling of it, but, because it hasn’t sold, Keoni always seems to be in a museum, where one goes to honour past ancestors. That is the most interesting, beautiful kind of story I’m making up in my head. Whereas Kawela is out in the world with people, with the living. And I’m going, “Oh my gosh.” I love life like that.*



**Figure 5**  
**Ioane Ioane**  
***Va'a Aitu Keoni***  
**2006-2007**  
**High gloss marine epoxy resin on Oregon pine**  
**3900x700 mm**  
**Shown at Whangarei Art Museum, 2009**  
**Author's photograph**

*Va 'a Aitu Keoni* (Figure 5) can be seen as both vessel and water. Its general outline resembles the shape of a canoe, and the undulating deep blue surface has the look of ripples in the ocean. This sculpture honours a son who has moved through to an ethereal world, while the twin sculpture honours a son active on earth. The identical monuments are at once watercraft and water, paying homage to both the living and dead. The aspect of the sculpture that is canoe represents a vessel journeying to a spiritual destination. The aspect of the sculpture that is water represents the flow of every moment, as well as the space between those moments.

## VĀ

In 1984 when Ioane was still in art school, he heard that another Sāmoan artist was having a show. Exhibitions of the work of Sāmoan painters in 1984 were not a common occurrence. Ioane met Fatu Feu‘u at the opening of Fatu’s show at the Spinning Frontier Gallery Pacific in Auckland. It was early in Feu‘u’s career, one of his first solo shows. Feu‘u has become a leading senior artist of the “Pacific art movement” in New Zealand. He took Ioane under his wing early on, and as they became acquainted they learned they are from the same village in Sāmoa.

In 1987 Feu‘u told Ioane about his vision to start an organisation that promotes Oceanic art. The following year, Feu‘u opened a gallery space and started the organisation that is now Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust. By 1987 Ioane had a family and has said he was not really taking a lively active interest in being an Artist. Ioane’s involvement in helping to found Tautai was an act of taking care of the vā. Vā is most commonly referred to as the space between two people. Fatu was passionate about setting up a space for Oceanic artists. Ioane says that as a Sāmoan he wanted to help Fatu, an elder member of the same Sāmoan village. Ioane modestly says that he was more of an errand runner and assistant than a founder. He was just helping a friend.

Ioane once described vā as the Sāmoan vision of respecting oneself and being able to respect other people and other things, yet he recognises vā is a more widely Oceanic concept. In taking care of the space between the two of us, Ioane also pointed out its similarities to the Japanese notion of “ma,” which also simply refers to an interval in space and/or time but has the complexity of being a “significant element within a generalized Japanese cultural identity” (Sen 5).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For more on “ma/間” see also Komparu, Morita, Pilgrim, and Isozaki. I am grateful to Richard Footnote continues on next page.



## Vā in Oceania

A complete and nuanced understanding of cultural concepts, such as vā, will never be gained through words alone, however looking at how words are defined and used is a place to start. Oceanic peoples are connected not only by the ocean, but, for many, the space between also connects them.

Vā, wā, vahā, vaha‘a are derived from the Proto Polynesian term “waa” meaning “interval (of space or time)” (Sperlich 349).<sup>33</sup> In Niuean “vahā” refers to time and space and “vahāloto” indicates a space between (Sperlich 348). Modern Tahitian translates a space between objects or time as “ārea,” but “vā” is acknowledged as the archaic word (Wahlroos 462). Remnants of vā in Rotuman are found in “väevā” meaning “to be separated by” (Inia et al 342). In Tuamotuan “vā” refers to a space or area between two objects (Stimson 594). The Tuvaluan “vā” refers to a space between things or time, the distance between two persons or objects, as well as a relationship between persons (Jackson 277). In Wallisian “vaha‘a” means “between” (Rensch 59). Māori language definitions for “wā” include “place” and “time” (Ryan 330). In Sāmoan “vā” can mean the space between two places, things, or people, but it can also refer specifically to relationships (Milner 307). In Tongan “vā” refers to a distance between as well as attitudes or feelings toward one another, and “vaha” is defined as “space between, space apart” (Churchward, *Dictionary* 528). The revised and enlarged edition of Pukui and Elbert’s *Hawaiian Dictionary* (1986) generally

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Bullen for introducing me to these sources, as useful English language sources are not easy to find. They are worth mentioning here because previous writings have made cross-cultural comparisons between the Sāmoan “vā” and a Japanese referent but without citations. For example, Albert Wendt (and then quoted in Tamaira in her discussion of Hawaiian wā) equated the Sāmoan vā with “*Wa* in Maori and Japanese” (402). However, without any references or the Japanese kanji character, it is difficult to know which “wa” Wendt is referring to or if he mistook “wa” for “ma”.

<sup>33</sup> Sperlich’s focus is on the Niuean language. He asserts the Niuean word “vahā” is a reconstructed form of the “Proto Polynesian term ‘waa’” based on data collected by the Comparative Polynesian Lexicon Project (POLLEX), which is undertaken by the University of Auckland under the auspices of Professor Bruce Biggs.

defines “wā” as a space between two objects or points in time (375), while an older (1865) Hawaiian language dictionary also refers to “wa” as “a situation without friends or connexions” as in “he alii e noho wale ana i ka wa” meaning “a chief without subjects” (Andrews 503). Other than this obscure reference to “wa” in Hawaiian describing a situation without connections, it seems vā is most commonly referred to in terms of relationships, in addition to a space between, within Sāmoan and Tongan lexicons.

Giovanni Bennardo, a linguistic anthropologist whose research focuses on linguistic, cognitive, and cultural representations of spatial relationships particularly in the Kingdom of Tonga, asserts that there are three spatial prepositions in the Tongan language; ‘i (at), ki (to), and mei (from).<sup>34</sup> Most English prepositions of location fall into Bennardo’s category of Tongan “spatial nouns”(52).<sup>35</sup> Bennardo has identified five structural contexts in which spatial nouns are found. “Vaha‘a” is unique among the Tongan spatial nouns in that it not only modifies the location of an object (between two objects), but it is treated as if it were an object itself. According to Bennardo, vaha‘a defines a space separating two objects, and that space then “is treated as an Object in itself, and finally thought of as possibly containing something” (56).

<sup>34</sup> Bennardo recognizes this assertion contradicts Churchward’s indication of nine spatial prepositions in Churchward’s 1953 book on Tongan grammar. However, Bennardo explains that the six other forms included by Churchward are “morphologically conditioned allomorphs” of the three basic Tongan spatial prepositions. (48)

<sup>35</sup> The complete set of “spatial nouns” (Bennardo 52)

hahake (east)	to’omata’u (right)	mu’a (front)	‘olunga (above)
hihifo (west)	to’ohema (left)	mui (back)	lalo (below)
tokelau (north)	loto (inside)	mua’i (front)	funga (top)
tonga (south)	tu’a (outside)	mui’i (back)	fukahi (top)
kō (yonder)	tafa’aki (side)	mata (front)	kilisi (bottom)
ve’e (border)	fa’ahi (in/inside)	tumu’aki (peak)	tuliki (corner)
vaha’a (space between)			



Karlo Mila-Schaaf offers *vā* as a valuable system to help guide social work practitioners to more effectively interact with Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand. She recognises that the term “Pacific” in New Zealand amalgamates “many ethnically diverse, linguistically distinctive and geographically separated people” (Mila-Schaaf, “*Vā-centred*” 9). This conflation presents a great challenge to articulating what would constitute “Pacific” cultural competencies amongst public service practitioners. However, Mila-Schaaf has sought out commonalities amongst Pacific peoples, such as a shared understanding of *vā*, to provide relevant and meaningful material from which to develop guidelines and frameworks. She emphasises a Pacific worldview “that places collective interaction ahead of individual agency” (“*Vā-centred*” 13). The social dimension of *vā* is of paramount importance to understanding such a worldview because, according to Mila-Schaaf, relationships “provide the operational mechanics of a collective” (9). Mila-Schaaf sees *vā* not just as a space or a relationship but as “a system requiring harmony, balance, reciprocity and mutual respect” (12). By encouraging public service practitioners to understand and use this system, Mila-Schaaf sees *vā* as a pathway to better wellbeing of Pacific societies in New Zealand.

### ***Vā* in Relationships**

*Vā* denotes a space between two objects, people, and/or institutions. That space is of paramount importance because it contains the relationship connecting the entities on either side of the space. Those relationships give meaning to a person’s life. In Bradd Shore’s ethnography of the Sāmoan village Sala’ilua, he asserts that the Sāmoan concept of person is based on that person’s relationships rather than the person’s character or self: “A clue to the Sāmoan notion of person is found in the popular Sāmoan saying *teu le vā* (take care of the relationship)” (136). Shore recognises that *vā* takes on the meanings of “space” or “between,” but in this instance chooses “relationship” as the most appropriate English equivalent. And, anthropologist Helen Morton, while studying how children in Tonga are

socialised and how they come to take on the cultural identity of “Tongan,” found that while the literal translation of *vā* denoted a distance between, “*vā* is used to describe people’s relationships and feelings for one another” (245). Sāmoan literary and visual artist Albert Wendt has described *vā* as “the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things” (402). And Wendt reminds us that the “meanings change as the relationships and the contexts change” (402).

For Ioane, sometimes the ocean itself is the space between that connects him to another person. He has described the ocean as his home, something that connects him to himself and also to the infinite. But the ocean has also acted as a messenger, moving between Ioane and another person – an intermediary helping to care for that relationship and make it beautiful.

*It’s an ancient internet for me. I remember when I was dating my son’s mum – we were in our courting period – she was in Vanuatu for a week on a job. I faxed her because we didn’t have internet then. I wanted her to go to the ocean in Vanuatu at a particular time that lines up with New Zealand time. I asked her to go to the ocean and put her cheek or her lips on the surface of the ocean, and I will kiss her when I kiss the ocean outside my house. She got on the plane that same day. She had a few more days to go on the job, but she got on the plane that same day because she missed me. So that’s how the ocean is for me.*

### **Vā in Social Spaces**

Sa‘iliemanu Lilomaiaava-Doktor sees *vā* as a “social space” (1). Although Lilomaiaava-Doktor focuses on *vā* as a lens through which to frame Sāmoan population movement, she seems to share Shore’s view that it contributes to the conceptualisation of a person in that it “is linked to personal identity and self-esteem” (20). In terms of *malaga*, which is roughly glossed as “migration,” the “Sāmoan idea of *vā*, or social space, engages the power within and between

spaces and places arrayed in opposition to each other” (Lilomaiva-Doktor 1). *Vā* not only connotes a space inhabited by a relationship, it also implies the nature of that relationship as one of mutual respect. *Vā* therefore contributes to characterising “culturally proper and improper behaviors” (Lilomaiva-Doktor 14). Along those lines then, Lilomaiva-Doktor has found the following:

*Vā* thus governs and guides individual and ‘*āiga* [kin group] behavior, inflected by factors such as gender, cultural status, age, and marital status. The social imperatives of *vā* involve work and effort by those concerned to ensure its balance and coherence. Epistemologically, *vā* is encoded with respect, service, and hospitality in maintaining and retaining ‘*āiga* status and a socially well-located family. These goals are underpinned by an ideology of participation, obligation, and reciprocation. (14-15)

When thinking of *vā* as simply a “space between” one must remember that identity, self, and place are all informed by and inform that space. Again, Lilomaiva-Doktor reminds us, “Implicating webs of social networks, institutions, and cultural ideologies, *vā* has spiritual, cultural, economic, political, and social implications for thinking about place, legitimacy, and belonging” (21).

Sitiveni Halapua, known for his work in conflict resolution through *talanoa*,<sup>36</sup> not only touches on the respect embedded in *vā* but also the importance *vā* can have on creating pathways to peace:

Meaning in conflict and peace is to be found in the Pacific-based concept of space or *va* within which the connections of rights and obligations are located. *Va* is the space i.e. the connections of rights and obligations of who we are, what we want and what we do that we nurture, preserve, enhance and share in our different ways in life. The moral dimension of *va* gives us the meaning in conflict and peace in our society. (N. pag.)

The connections of rights and obligations he speaks of are the rights to speak, to hear, and to speak in return; and the obligations of exchange that come with continual interactions over

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<sup>36</sup> *Talanoa* is a Tongan/Oceanic word for telling stories. An important aspect of *talanoa* lies in the art of listening because *talanoa* is most useful when used to recognise diversity and interconnectedness.

time. For Halapua, maintaining and cultivating “good va” through the rights and obligations it contains contribute to peace and unity-building.

Lilomaiava-Doktor explains that vā “underpins many of the interactions between people in everyday life” (15). However, linguistic anthropologist Alessandro Duranti has found that while acts of taking care of vā occur in everyday life, the usage of the word vā is not everyday. In particular, Duranti found the phrase “teuteu le vā” which he translates as “make the relationship beautiful,” is more appropriately found in formal settings such as village council meetings (343). He found this language reflective of the respectful and metaphorical nature of the discourse in the meetings. In household communication between mothers and their children, Duranti found simpler directives dominated the conversations. Yet even in interpreting the directive to sit properly or “take care of your sitting” “teu lau nofo,” Duranti asserts that a relationship or vā is also taken care of (344).

Tēvita O. Ka‘ili sees vā as “sociospatial ties” in a (Tongan) context “where human relationships are both socially and spatially constituted” (“Nurturing” 90). Ka‘ili’s main research focuses on Tongan transnationality (the multiple ties which connect migrants and their descendents to their place of ancestral origin and other diasporic communities) through “tauhi vā,” which he defines as “the art of creating and maintaining beautiful social relations” (*Creating* 27). Ka‘ili’s work draws on his own experiences within Tongan communities on Maui, Hawai‘i and in Seattle, Washington to illustrate how Tongans perform tauhi vā within and across time and space. The Tongan word “tauhi” is usually glossed as “to take care of, to tend, to nurture.” Ka‘ili likens the Tongan meaning of “tauhi vā” to the Sāmoan concept “teu le vā,” which Shore translates as “take care of the relationship” (see above), and Lilomaiava-Doktor defines as to “care, nurture, or embellish the social space” (18).

Interdisciplinary medical anthropologist Michael Poltorak introduces his own nuances to vā: “‘relatedness’ is a better translation for the pan-Pacific concept of vā, closer to experience

than ‘space between’ or ‘relationship’ ” (13). And to Poltorak, “*tauhi vaha‘a*” “refers to the *evocation* and *intensification* of relatedness. In other words, when people carry out acts of *tauhi vaha‘a*, they both evoke and increase the experiences that constitute relatedness” (italics in original, 13). Poltorak has found that these experiences of “relatedness” create an environment for people to be more sensitive when looking at Tongan incidences of mental illness.

### **Vā in Space and Time**

Karlo Mila-Schaaf is of Tongan and Palagi heritage, but as a woman who was born in New Zealand and who speaks only English, she considers herself “a student or learner of Pacific cultural concepts as opposed to an expert” (“Vā-centred” 8). Her understanding of *vā* therefore comes in large part from rigorous research rather than lived experience necessarily. This approach has allowed her to look into different facets of *vā*. In her research working toward a Pacific approach to social work practice, Mila-Schaaf also found *vā* to be “used interchangeably to describe aesthetic balance in art and architecture as well as aesthetic balance in relationships” (12).

Architectural theorist Albert Refiti sees *vā* as “a spatial ordering concept that exists between things and administers a code of good (ideal) behaviour, an invisible language that enables space and things to be configured in a positive manner” (209). He recognises the ocean, which in a sea of islands is “an in-between space where commonality and difference coexist,” as a source for the concept of that spatial ordering and as “the single most powerful architectural device in the evolution of Polynesian architecture and culture” (Refiti 209). Refiti discusses the Sāmoan *malae*<sup>37</sup> for example, which is almost always oriented toward the ocean. The configuration of how people are assembled and speak in the *faletele* (chiefly

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<sup>37</sup> Sāmoan *malae* refers to an open space usually in the centre of a village used for social gatherings and formal discussions.

meeting house) during important village meetings is governed by vā. And in those meetings “the middle portion of the faletele’s roof structure metaphorically spans the vā or gap between the various important families of the village” (Refiti 210). So the structures on the malae are spatially ordered in relationship to each other, while also playing a role to facilitate the space between families of the village. Refiti sees this synergy as fulfilling the fullest sense of architecture in action, “where oratory and the politics of manners and the art of location collide to give meaning to the building” (210).

‘Okusitino Māhina has developed his own tā-vā (time-space) theory of reality based on Oceanic concepts of tā and vā. Art in the context of Māhina’s theory of reality encompasses nature, mind, and society. Māhina defines art “as the rhythmic and symmetrical reorganisation of time and space that produces harmony and beauty” (5). In this sense, art both submits to the impermanent qualities of time and space, while also playing an active role in altering their structures. He refers to visual art, poetry, music, and dance as communicative social activities that are transformative in nature.<sup>38</sup>

During the interlude between awake and asleep Ioane was trying to reorganise space and time by bringing a ray gun over from a dream. Having spent his earliest formative years in Sāmoa, Ioane understands vā on a more experiential level rather than through the articulations of linguists, anthropologists, historians, and geographers. His participation in founding Tautai was an act of taking care of the vā between himself and Fatu. Feu‘u also tasked Ioane with keeping an eye out for more Oceanic artists and art students, another act of developing and nurturing relationships. When Ioane told me that his work is informed by taking care of the vā, I am sure that referred to his life work more so than specifically to his

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<sup>38</sup> The focus here is on Māhina’s view of “the arts” in relationship to his tā-vā theory of reality. However, Māhina’s copious writings on tā-vā also heavily informed Ka‘ili’s work on the art of creating harmonious social spaces.

artwork, because for Ioane, art is just one of the rituals that constitutes his life. It is one and the same with the journey of life.

## IOANE'S STORIES

I was aligned the moment I was born, and then human condition fucked it up a bit, took it askew. So my whole life is about lining it back up again. That is where I pursue change. The change is not about changing the alignment, but it's about changing the way my psyche had been shifted through human conditioning. The change is about getting back to that magic that I was before I was born.

I don't see art as separate from anything else. Cooking, going to the dairy, driving, swimming, making love, fighting, arguing, catching the bus, getting pissed off with somebody, hurting your leg, doing a film – they are all one and the same for me. These are all practices to shift me back to that magic alignment. Even getting drunk so my head is free and relaxed, and not getting drunk, and sitting by the ocean or being in the ocean, which is the best kind of meditation for me. That's how I do it. And by being involved in the world, not running away from reality or from adversity because life is beautiful even when it's fucked up, it's beautiful.

I place myself in unfamiliar situations, environments, and places to embrace challenges and exercise patience with myself and with things outside of myself. When I pull things of comfort close to me, it insulates me. That's cool, but I learn nothing when I surround myself with those security blankets. So I do it a bit at a time on my journey in this short life that I have. I pull together things that are familiar to regroup and then I go out and into the unfamiliar. And I try not to do it at the expense of myself otherwise there is nobody there to learn.

I get a gut feeling when I am on track, but there are signs as well. When I arrived here [where Ioane lived on Orere Point], a kingfisher who has been here for twelve years, as told by my landlady, sat on the top of my sculpture. I had placed it there before Christmas, and it was the only bird that sat there all that time. Then a couple of weeks ago, my son and I went



back to one of the sleep outs, and the kingfisher was there by the sink. We thought it was injured, but it wasn't. It just arrived there and sat there, and we gave it some water. It allowed us to touch it and hold it, and we placed it back. And my son said, "That's Keoni, Daddy." Keoni is my son's brother who died at birth. We always associate birds with Keoni, and that's why we collect feathers. If we ever see a feather, we say, "Oh, that's Keoni."

So anyway, it was getting late and the kingfisher was still there by the sink just outside the door where my son Kawela and I sleep. Kawela went to bed and I sat there having a cigarette, and the kingfisher watched me. Whenever I moved, the kingfisher moved his head. For the longest time it just sat there. It just watched. It didn't fly off. And I was having a cigarette and in my head I was saying, "I love you, Keoni." And then I went to bed. When I came out the next morning, it was gone. Things like that, to me, say that I'm on track for realigning back to magic, that I'm doing the right thing, and it's not at the expense of myself.

Another example would be a performance I did with Kawela's mum to honor Keoni. I had a pigeon, which I pulled out from under her long lavalava<sup>39</sup> in the performance, and the pigeon was Keoni. Then I walked to the window in the gallery and let it free. Then the fire alarms all went and we had three fire engines outside come to see if there was a fire. There was no fire. They couldn't figure out how the alarms started.

Then a day later the gallery curator said that we should meet to talk about the photographs. She took photographs before the performance with everybody in the gallery, the whole performance, and after the performance. Everything was fine right up to when the performance began, then all the photos were black. After a series of black, it all went back to normal. All images of after the performance were normal. Subtle things like those black photos say to me that I'm still OK, that whatever I'm doing must be good. That's how I know I'm on track not at the expense of myself.

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<sup>39</sup> Lavalava in Sāmoan refers to a garment of rectangular fabric that ties around the waist.

We are all spiritual, all of us, even those who don't believe in that notion. And of course, my life, like everyone's life, is a spiritual journey. And this is just my way of moving in it and understanding it.

## Chapter Tavola

“Serving my community is most important.”

--Ema Tavola

### STORIES OF EMA

Born in 1982 in Suva, Fiji to Helen and Kaliopate Tavola, Ema Rosemary Vasemaca Tavola recognises her life has not followed what one might expect to be a natural progression of being born in Suva. When Ema was two, her family moved to New Malden, England, in the greater London area. Four years later, her father was appointed Fijian Ambassador to Belgium and the family moved to Brussels, where Ema and her siblings attended the British School of Brussels. She was aware of her position of privilege and the possibilities that opened up to her from a young age.

*When I was growing up in Belgium I'd often think, "Why am I here?" I knew it was because of my father's position, and that my mother sacrificed a lot to be a spouse to my father so he could follow his professional career path. It also seemed like just a random situation where a mixed-race Fijian girl<sup>40</sup> could be brought up in Belgium going to an English school. So I was always very aware of why I was there and that everything was possible. I recognise it's a privilege to be brought up where it was just natural to know that you could do anything.*

After 14 years in Belgium, Kaliopate Tavola finished his diplomatic posting and the family returned to Suva. Ema went to New Zealand to live with extended family in Wellington and complete secondary school. She describes her time at Wellington High School as “uninspired,” as she felt disconnected from English literature and Classical Studies. Even the art department fell short of engaging Ema. The New Zealand high school art

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<sup>40</sup> Ema's “mixed-race” heritage combines indigenous Fiji Islander on her father's side and Pākehā New Zealander on her mother's.

programme did not measure up to that of the British School of Brussels, which was as well resourced as university art programmes in New Zealand and staffed with teachers who encouraged students to stretch their creativity in any medium. Ema's experience of making art in New Zealand was restrained and the antithesis of creativity because all art students were trained to make the same "good art."

After graduating high school, Ema was happy to return to Fiji for a planned year of gaining work experience. She felt marginalised living in Wellington, and felt at home in Fiji even though she had spent most of her life outside Fiji.

*Fiji always meant something different everywhere we were. In Belgium it was a sort of mystical place because we were in Belgium for 14 years and we went to Fiji only twice. I definitely understood it was where I was from, and because my father was an Ambassador of the Fiji Embassy, I grew up in a very representational way - representing Fiji. In the Embassy house there were Fijians in our lives all the time. And there was never a question that I was a Fijian child. But that **real** understanding of home didn't come until I was living in Wellington during 6<sup>th</sup> form and 7<sup>th</sup> form. When I'd go home to Fiji, I really understood that everyone is kind of like me in Fiji, and it's so comfortable. It's my context. I felt comfortable with who I was, more than anywhere else in the world. I started to realise that this is what home is supposed to be like. And even though I had been away all my life, it didn't matter. The beauty and strength I find from the Pacific is that you can't disconnect. You're born into it and your connections are inextricable. Living over here [in New Zealand], that's such a valuable knowledge to have.*

Ema's year of gaining work experience in Fiji was cut short. She was made redundant as the Creative Director of FijiVillage.com after the 19 May 2000 coup and returned to Wellington until the end of the year. After returning to Fiji, unemployed, Ema started making paintings and participated in a painting workshop at the Oceania Centre for Arts and

Culture<sup>41</sup> at the University of the South Pacific led by visiting New Zealand-based Niuean artist, John Pule. Interactions with Epeli Hau'ofa impacted Ema at this early stage of her development as an artist, but it was not until Epeli's passing that she realised how much he had influenced her life. At the time of the workshop, in 2001, Ema felt challenged by Epeli and by the "boys' club" atmosphere at the Centre. Most of the participants were young and male. Ema was one of five female artists who participated and exhibited in the Oceania Centre's Red Wave Collective exhibition at the end of the workshop.

*Largely what this workshop exposed to me was that the women were making a different kind of work. Epeli had said to me pretty straight forward, "Look at Fijian myths and legends; that's what you should paint about."<sup>42</sup> It wasn't really part of my experience, and I just couldn't paint about it. I really wanted to speak about experiences I was familiar with, and I think the other women did, too. I started to find these artists like Luisa [Tora] and her partner Sangeeta [Singh], who were also making really quite interesting work that wasn't informed by myths and legends. Work created by women is often seen as too personal because largely, our visual arts are a platform to reach a resolution for some form of internal conflict. That does not make it any less valuable and it is not necessarily less marketable. It's just a different kind of work, and it was very new and very different.*

Perhaps it was too new and different for Epeli. Luisa Tora and Sangeeta Singh once had what Luisa describes as an "extended, albeit passionate" conversation with Epeli and his wife Barbara. Luisa asked Epeli why female and male artists at the Centre didn't seem to occupy

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<sup>41</sup> Now the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies.

<sup>42</sup> Many artists at the Oceania Centre are still painting about Oceanic myths and legends, but according to Mason Lee, Epeli also directed him to look within and create from his inner voice. For Mason, after considering his "inner being" and Epeli's directive, he "found focus in re-presentations of Fijian myths and legends" (Higgins 30). For Ema, looking within did not reveal Fijian myths and legends.

equal status. Epeli spoke of his motivation, inspired by Georgina and Ulli Beier's work, to provide training and income generation for unemployed (male) youth.

At a symposium that was a tribute to Epeli, where Luisa was a co-panellist with Ema,<sup>43</sup> Luisa recalled bringing the issue to Epeli: *We argued that women also need to generate income, therefore needed equal profile to allow that to happen, and he resisted. Barbara gently intervened and kept saying, "Just listen to what they have to say." At this point I want to clarify that I share this story with you because I want to explain how the discussion of the representation of women's art through the Oceania Centre particularly "Pacific art" rather than discouraged, informed and bolstered my resolve to promote Pacific women's art and writing. And Ema and I and other friends of Red Wave have discussed it. We don't see this as a slur of any kind, more of just, sometimes you need a nudge to get up and stop saying, "why don't you do it," and do it yourself.*

Ema and Luisa did get up and promote the work of Oceanic women. And seven years after that conversation with Epeli, Ema and Luisa, along with several other women, organised and created the exhibition *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power*,<sup>44</sup> which is discussed later in this chapter. But before completing the 2001 painting workshop with John Pule, Ema also stood up by challenging the men and boys at the Oceania Centre by not taking "no" for an answer.

*At Oceania Centre we were given a palette of browns. So I'd asked to use red, and they said no, and I begged to use red. Then I put red in the rude parts of my painting. That painting started conversations. It pissed people off. It definitely pissed the boys off. I loved*

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<sup>43</sup> University of Otago Pacific Research Cluster Symposium: *An Oceanic Imagination: A Tribute to the Life and Mind of 'Epeli Hau'ofa*, Discussion panel: "Visions of Building Pacific Representations through the Arts," 21 October 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies, 24-27 September 2008, then at the Fiji Museum for the month of October 2008

*the response. It was my first experience of making art that really got people talking, whether they liked it or not.*

That may have been a significant step in the transition from being an extremely shy child to an adult who, while smiling, describes herself as an agitator. That workshop also redirected Ema toward New Zealand. John Pule recommended the course offered in Otara at the Manukau School of Visual Arts.<sup>45</sup>

*I said that I didn't really like New Zealand from my experience in Wellington and that I love Fiji. And he said, "Well, Otara is the next best thing." I really listened to his endorsement, and I applied. When someone I respect endorses something, I'm very trusting. I trusted him fully. I didn't even think Elam was ever an option because it wasn't in Otara. It was really that you could study art in a place like Otara and that you could live in a place like Otara that excited me.*

Ema had visited Otara once before. From the Wellington suburb of Mount Cook, she took a road trip with some high school friends. That trip to Otara was the first time Ema entered a community in New Zealand where the majority of the people were from minority groups. From Ema's experience in New Zealand up to that point, Oceanic peoples were seen mostly in rugby and the arts. But in South Auckland she was excited by how visible Oceanic peoples and cultures are in every aspect of everyday life. When Ema uses the word "ghettoised" to describe Otara, she uses it with love and positive associations simply to mean that Oceanic experiences are mainstream and at the centre rather than on the periphery like most places in New Zealand.

*It's my favourite place in South Auckland. We've got the art school [Manukau School of Visual Art] and the markets; it's always been the hub. And I like that it has a bad reputation. It's like people don't want to associate with it. The motorway on and off ramp*

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<sup>45</sup> Now the Faculty of Creative Arts at Manukau Institute of Technology

*sign doesn't say Otara. It says East Tamaki, which is the industrial area where hardly anyone lives. But it's such a great community and it's so alive. People are so vocal. When I first moved to Auckland I moved to Mission Bay, which is very white. At eighteen I was the youngest person on the street, and then I moved to Otara and felt like the oldest person not to have babies. Just seeing babies every day and gorgeous brown kids and gorgeous brown people and old people; it was just lovely. I love this feeling that we are in essentially a white country, and this is a real ghetto-ised sort of community. That's what drew me to Otara. I think I've fallen in love with Otara because I grew up in the diaspora, so I find a place to stand here. From my travels to the States last year, seeing Pacific people in the [San Francisco] Bay Area and LA and Hawai'i, I feel that the diaspora experience is where I stand.*

But Ema felt that the institutional system of approval at art school made her art worse, and in her last year of school she faced professional and personal challenges that knocked her down. One of the dispiriting experiences at school involved participating in a petition against an artist who was involved with the Auckland Triennial. Ema describes the artist's photographs as "heroine chic" or "ghetto chic." Because Ema became involved with a petition against the photographer's work, she was fired from her job as a Pacific Nations Mentor.<sup>46</sup>

*The photographs were of South Auckland and South Auckland people. She [the photographer] was living in South Auckland but not from South Auckland. The community members who started the petition felt it was irresponsible for the Auckland*

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<sup>46</sup> In 2010, seven years after Ema was fired as a mentor for voicing her complaint against Artspace's inclusion of Oceanic artists without considering what it would mean to Oceanic audiences, Ema was asked to participate in the Auckland Triennial at Artspace in an artist's talk with Shigeyuki Kihara. In 2013 Fresh Gallery Otara was the only gallery outside of the central city participating in the Auckland Triennial. Even though Ema no longer works at Fresh Gallery Otara, the gallery's inclusion is a reflection of the important role Ema has played in developing and promoting contemporary Oceanic art in Auckland.



*Triennial organisers to reinforce negative stereotypes about South Auckland, when the community itself largely works really hard to fight against those stereotypes. It was a really negative representation. I was involved with that petition, and I got fired from my job. It broke me, and I felt like a failure. And, a few relationships were compromised because of my involvement with that petition. But I believed in what I was doing and I still believe that it really was a negative representation of South Auckland. My involvement was suggesting we send the letter to the board of the organising committee of the Triennial. I didn't write the letter, but I thought the letter was awesome!*

*That experience gave me a real connection with South Auckland and the activism that a lot of the community is involved with. I became very aware that art that makes it into the mainstream feeds a certain community. A lot of Pacific art that had mainstream approval, by artists who were experiencing success, was made for white eyes. And brown eyes didn't like it because you don't show photos of beaten up people and fight scenes to our own people. What is the benefit of this? That's when I became really aware of what's different when you show brown artwork or art to a brown audience or to a white audience.*

Losing the mentoring job because of the petition coincided with personal heartbreak, and Ema felt she had been knocked right down. During that sad, dark year Ema buried herself in behind-the-scenes arts administration, which led to an opportunity to manage Artnet Gallery in Otara Town Centre. Artnet Gallery gave Ema her first opportunity to curate an exhibition in 2004. *The Artists are Described as ... Polynesian Males*<sup>47</sup> featured two painters whose interest in portraiture resulted in what Ema describes as a “beautiful exhibition of portraits of Polynesian males” juxtaposed by the show’s title taken from *Police 10-7*, a New Zealand reality show where police officers are looking for criminals often

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<sup>47</sup> Artnet Gallery, October/November 2004, Artists: Samiu Napa’a and Reagan Iosefa Samoa

described as “Polynesian males.” Ema’s interest in social justice has always informed her curatorial practice. Her discontent with art school and her experience with the petition are also experiences that have stayed with Ema as she considers organising shows.

*My curatorial practice is about art that impacts people. It’s important to everyday people, and you don’t have to go to art school or be an art wanker to get it because you’re part of it. It is a human thing that we’re all able to tap into. Our grandmothers are not going to come into an art gallery, but when they go and buy their bread in the morning they might go past the gallery and go, “What’s that?” We need to make them part of it.*

Ema develops exhibition programmes that allow audience members from the gallery’s community to reflect on themselves. She values art that acts as society’s mirror, creating space for discovery and confirmation. For Ema, curating and visual arts promotion are part of a bigger picture of social development. The government system she worked within encouraged this approach. The Manukau City Council (before the formation of the combined Auckland Council) did not necessarily intend to shape Ema’s curatorial practice, as the city’s council-run art centres were not officially curated spaces. But, as the Pacific Arts Coordinator, Ema’s curatorial practice developed through a council mandate to serve the community. The Pacific Arts Coordinator was charged with supporting the development of the Pacific arts sector in Manukau city. The Pacific Arts Coordinator could align the platform with any arts discipline so long as s/he created opportunities for artists, facilitated professional development, and raised awareness of funding opportunities. Because Ema’s area of expertise is visual art, she created a gallery space, Fresh Gallery Otarā. The gallery is situated in the Otarā shopping centre (the space Artnet Gallery once occupied), so Otarā’s Oceanic youth are the primary audience/community the gallery serves.

From 2006 to 2012 at Fresh Gallery Otarā, Ema developed exhibition programmes, organised events in conjunction with the exhibitions such as workshops, artist’s talks, and

opening night celebrations, and fostered relationships with funding sources such as Creative New Zealand, Tautai Trust, and the British Council. Ema describes Fresh Gallery Otara as primarily a learning space that works largely with early career artists, often the venue for their first solo shows. As the manager of Fresh, Ema produced 66 exhibitions, curating several and creating opportunities for others to curate as well. The space was not necessarily about having an art historical context in terms of developing a show. It was more about educating those involved on best practices. This knowledge would bolster the artists and prepare them for larger opportunities in the wider art world.

Even though Ema describes her curatorial practice as not necessarily situated within an art historical context, it is her attention to thematic approaches that sets her curatorial practice apart from some others arranging contemporary Oceanic art. The contributions Ema has made, and continues to make, have situated her as an important player when examining this moment in contemporary Oceanic art and contemporary art more broadly. As a self-proclaimed curator,<sup>48</sup> Ema found her own approaches to conceptualising a show, carrying out research, collaborating with the artists, and planning the exhibition space. Perhaps because Ema did not receive any formal training in curatorial practice but still learned how to put together thoughtful exhibitions, she has little patience for curators who compile shows that do not seem to have a point beyond displaying the work of Oceanic artists.

*A lot of Pacific Island group shows, which I've been involved with since I moved to New Zealand, tire me and frustrate me because there isn't enough emphasis on the space and the work in the space and the conversations between the works and the visual language of these individual artists. We're all there because we're brown. I've seen more than ten*

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<sup>48</sup> Ema used to call herself a “self-proclaimed curator” because she did not receive any formal curatorial training but called herself a curator anyway. Others started referring to Ema as a curator soon after. Although Ema did not study curating at an institution, in 2004 she assisted Jim Vivieaere on *Niu Dialogue* at The Edge in Auckland. It was the beginning of a hands-on education in curating, most of her practice after that came through trial and error and what Ema describes as DIY curating.

*years of just another brown show. I can't even look at the work. There's no conversation going on. They are rooms with things on the wall. It's frustrating as hell because I don't think that does anything for our credibility in the sector in terms of looking at our artists as strong visual artists. They're just in a show because they've got brown skin. It's not good enough.*<sup>49</sup>

*So, I think I've become stauncher in driving strong thematic approaches, which gives people an insight into the context of the work, why it was made, our social realities, our political realities. I've also tried more and more to get artists to make new work. A lot of those group shows are just basically someone saying, "Oh I saw something cool over there, and I saw something cool in this studio, and I'll just go and pick up all these pieces." But there's a lot of strength in creating an exhibition from scratch, sitting down with artists. Curating for me has become quite collaborative to some extent. There is a lot of two-way dialogue. I'm feeding back to the artists, they're feeding back to me. At the end of the day, they've all got to feel really comfortable about what they're making, about the theme. If it doesn't sit well with them, then we evolve it. It's got to fit for both of us.*

Ema's choices in selecting artists are not about economic drives or academic drives. Fresh Gallery is a platform for ideas. Ema has never been boxed in the paradigm that art is for money.<sup>50</sup> As a city council-run space Fresh Gallery Otara is supported by ratepayers' money, which allowed Ema to create an environment that encourages artists to make art without necessarily needing to focus on creating work that will sell. However, Ema has

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<sup>49</sup> Group shows of Oceanic artists in New Zealand were problematic even prior to the ten years Ema had been seeing "brown group shows." Nicholas Thomas notes that although contemporary Oceanic artists "welcomed group exhibitions of Pacific artists in the late eighties, by 1994 [when *Bottled Ocean* opened] the effect seemed pigeonholing rather than enabling" ("Exhibit" 323-324).

<sup>50</sup> This is a point of difference Ema makes when discussing the Oceania Centre. As previously mentioned, the Oceania Centre created a venue for (mostly male) youth to generate income by creating and selling artwork.

found that once a platform was created to explore one's voice, and validate that voice, a market evolved. In the first nine months of 2009, for example, the gallery, which is in one of the lowest socio-economic areas in New Zealand, sold \$18,000 of artwork. Ema believes the prosperous market for artwork at Fresh Gallery Otara has come out of her certainty in knowing that what they are doing is valid. She looks for work that is "honest, real, and truly transformative." She is not distracted by successful artists who Ioane described earlier in this thesis as "hopping on the bandwagon of 'Pacific rebirth.'"

*I see straight through that. I often measure the artists' intentions and consider who the audience is for the work. Working with Fresh has given me this lovely advantage in that I see everyday people come in and respond and interact with work. If the work is superficial, and generally that kind of work is what gets media interest and gets mainstream interest, sometimes the community will have a superficial engagement with it. They might come in and go "that's cool," but that's where it stops. Then you have artists whose work has people in tears and intrigued, and they want to talk to you about it. I think that is the best art because it has actually changed people's thinking, so they will leave the gallery having had that experience. That has made an impact on the world. I hope that Fresh is known for, and the artists I try to work with are artists who are, making the impact. Rather than artists whose work is just "cool," or, not cool at all.*

Part of what has moved Ema toward seeing art as a platform to raise awareness around the diversity of cultural experience is that she experienced having her identity challenged. In Auckland, more than in any other place she has lived, Ema felt her identity dissected. Ema felt like an "outsider" when her Oceanic-ness was challenged. New Zealand-born Oceanic peoples, especially in Auckland, are used to seeing Oceanic peoples and communities so they may have a preconceived notion of what "Fijian" is. Ema's appearance and English accent did not necessarily match that, so people would ask around class or race without coming at it

directly. Ema suspects that people were too polite to come out and ask, “Why do you sound ponsy?” But, all of the questions to figure her out, left Ema feeling scrutinised. However, in the end, having to repeatedly explain why she “talked funny” or did not “look Fijian” gave Ema the confidence she needed to eventually become a professional networker.

*I felt that because I was different, I wasn't being accepted by the Polynesian mainstream living in Auckland. When I'm in Fiji, there is no question about my Pacific Island-ness. Whenever I'm anywhere else in the world, when I say I'm a Pacific Islander, I am a Pacific Islander. But whenever I was in Auckland I felt it was being really dissected. The resentment I had in response to that is probably what led me to really look at New Zealand Pacific experience, and why people do that to you here. It's a funny feeling. Because I had fallen into an “outsider” thing, it makes me feel like art is a way for a wider community to get educated around the diversity of cultural experience, in this context of Pacific people. It's about promoting acceptance. Twelve Pacific Island shows a year can talk about twelve facets of Pacific Island-ness that are relevant to every person here.*

*It is idealistic to think that moving us forward in our understanding of ourselves and the validation of this experience here can have health benefits. But feeling comfortable with who we are here can strengthen this community because feeling more comfortable with ourselves and less conflicted and marginalised can benefit the health of the community. And it's a good thing for people to feel good about themselves. Art is a powerful platform that contributes to the bigger picture of social development, which is why I've moved toward working in local government.<sup>51</sup> For me, it's not about the gallery,*

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<sup>51</sup> Ema is not alone in her approach to art as a platform for social development and community health. Bernd Reiter, for example, found many examples in Brazil where art has become “a tool of empowerment, a conquest of citizenship rights and an investment into the creative power, visibility, pride and self-esteem of historically stigmatized and marginalized young people and their communities” (165).



Starting to work on *Identity Complex Identity* while she was at art school allowed Ema to meditate on stitching and return to the basics of symbols, shapes, and words. Ema's mother had taught her how to sew when she was 16-years old, just before she moved away from home. Her mother described sewing as a survival skill, which Ema questioned in that moment. But meditating on stitching did help Ema survive art school. It also created a framework for investigating Oceanic visual histories and visual languages after the introduction of fabric. She looked at the sulu,<sup>52</sup> tivaevae,<sup>53</sup> and quilting for post-colonial visual references. She looked at aspects of her own identity and created the piece in two equal components, representing her bi-cultural heritage of indigenous Fijian and Pākehā New Zealander.

Some of the symbols in the work speak to both the personal and political. The aerosol paint stencil "Mana Wahine" on the left side of the work references Ngahaia Te Awakotuku's book, which was a source of inspiration for Ema during school; it also pays homage to the strength of Māori women in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ema repeats the stag motif as a form of social commentary. She was first drawn to the sculptural quality of his antlers, but upon further research, found the stag has qualities appropriate to abstractly represent issues of personal import to Ema, which are also relevant to a broader Oceania. It touches upon a discussion around what is introduced and what is indigenous in Oceania because deer are introduced species to both Fiji and New Zealand. It brings up a gender inquiry, that is present in much of Ema's work, as only males have antlers. Even though deer use their antlers as tools to both attack and defend, the mounted deer head (a trophy of sorts) also represents a power inequality between privileged men with guns and deer. The antlers' function as weapons also interests Ema as a person who has lived through four coup

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<sup>52</sup> A sulu is a Fijian garment similar to a sarong or lavalava.

<sup>53</sup> Tivaevae usually refers to Cook Islands appliqué bed covers; tifaifai in French Polynesia.



governments. Ema's awareness of Fiji's militarisation fostered in her an attention to both modern and heritage Fijian weapons as well as the visual qualities of camouflage. The fabric selections for *Identity Complex Identity* were sourced in both Suva and Auckland. They came from and added to the suitcase of fabric that Ema left home with at sixteen.

The five pink and red leaf forms are outlined from a leaf from a tavola tree in Ema's family garden in Fiji. Ema and her siblings are the first generation in her family to carry on their father's name, Tavola.<sup>54</sup> Ema's father, Kaliopate Tavola, was named after his totem tree in Dravuni. The tavola tree is a tropical almond and was the tree planted when Ema's father's placenta was buried. Ema explained that knowing one's set of totems is part of understanding oneself in Fiji. Each totem in the set carries its own meaning and form of protection. For Ema, the totems also serve as a reminder that one is part of a collective of people who are of the land, as opposed to just living on it. Tavola connects Ema to her village, as her tree totem, but it also reminds her of how far her father has come, which in turn speaks to her own privileged upbringing.

Kaliopate Tavola is one of Ema's heroes because he has had an incredible life journey. Ema's father was born in a Fijian village on the island of Dravuni in the Navu province. The small island had only one village, not big enough to support a school. So he went to a different island from the age of five and stayed in a children's boarding house to go to primary school and then a larger island for intermediate school. His family moved to Suva so he could attend secondary school. His was the first generation to be urbanised so there was no extended family to stay with. While a student, it was not uncommon to go out and beg for food. Ema finds her father's story inspiring. Part of the respect she has for him comes from him not talking about the difficulties he faced. The stories came to the surface only through

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<sup>54</sup> The use of surnames is not a traditional practice in indigenous Fijian culture. Therefore, it is not unusual for several family members to all bear different last names.

research interviews Ema's sister conducted with their father. Kaliopate has achieved so much, as has his wife Dr. Helen Tavola. They named their Suva home "Dreamtime" inspired by Australian aboriginal dreamtime painting and philosophy. But they did not talk with their children about chasing their dreams. Instead, they prepared them to make grounded plans and take action.

As a child of a diplomat Ema developed social confidence in representing Fiji (and Oceania more generally). She has been able to use the unique skill set of growing up in international settings to better serve the artists in her community. It is natural for her to view artists and their work with a broad, international scope of opportunities. So when she curates, in addition to considering how to serve the greater community, she also thinks about how to leverage the artists' careers. Ema understands the industry with a global view and unapologetically curates shows that may be too "fine artsy" to be understood at the grassroots level. Ema's commitment to community informs her choices of artists, but her position of privilege makes her uniquely qualified to help launch the artists into the global art world. Both ends of the spectrum come together in her curatorial practice.

Being exclusive and being "fine artsy" are also ways of validating artwork. For example, with the *Fiji Times* exhibition,<sup>55</sup> Ema's curatorial experience led her to exhibit only one piece from each of the five artists in the show. She believes that giving each piece the space it needed, elevated the work. Also, creating an environment that validates the work creates a market for it. Sixty percent of the show sold.

The *Fiji Times* exhibition showcased the work of five Fiji women artists – Margaret Aull, Filani Macassey, Sangeeta Singh, Luisa Tora, and Torika Bolatagici Vetuna. The exhibition was an opportunity to express personal responses to Fiji's current political issues, while acutely aware of the artists' position of currently being outside Fiji. One curatorial

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<sup>55</sup> 9-14 October 2009, The Salon, Auckland

choice was to exploit the position of being outside Fiji because Ema and the artists have had the experience of making commentary about Fiji and receiving feedback from within Fiji asking what right they have to comment on a country they chose to leave. Commenting from within Fiji is difficult considering the Fiji Interim Government requires publishers to submit content to the government for approval before publishing. The image chosen for the promotional poster (Figure 7), Torika Bolatagici Vetuna's *Protect Me*, speaks against the tension of censorship and the backlash that comes from Fiji in attempts to silence outside commentary. The digital chromogenic print depicts part of a woman's face and neck. Her mouth is gagged by metal block letters "FIJI." The echo of an after image especially around the metal letters suggests the subject's mouth is still trying to move.



**Figure 7**  
**Torika Bolatagici Vetuna**  
**Promotional poster for *Fiji Times* exhibition**  
**2009**  
**The Salon, Auckland**  
**Image courtesy of the artist.**

Ema's ability to move with ease between many worlds allows her to serve her community at the grassroots level as well as operate on a global level that brings her to

conferences, symposia, and other international networking events. Ema has described part of her role as curator as an “ambassador for artists and artwork.” She sees exhibitions as the place where art meets audience, and the curator’s concern is the spaces between artist, artwork, and audience. Taking care of that *vā* is an act of caring about the artists, understanding what their work connects to, and interpreting the information that comes out of those spaces – linking artists and artwork to, and contextualising within, wider socio-political ideas.

Ema’s commitment to continuing to elevate the quality of Oceanic art in the New Zealand diaspora and allowing the sector to grow has generated a lot of conversations. Creating a series of events to more formally discuss and showcase Oceanic creativity was a logical progression in Ema’s career. She produced three Pacific Arts Summits, annual events from 2010 to 2012, which gathered artists and art appreciators for exhibitions, stage productions, fashion shows, poetry slams, book launches, film screenings, community mural projects, Pecha Kucha nights, and discussion forums on dance, architecture, heritage arts, and curating Oceanic art. The Pacific Arts Summits celebrated and showcased Oceanic arts and also celebrated Fresh Gallery Otara’s anniversaries. To celebrate Fresh Gallery’s sixth anniversary, Ema curated her last show as manager of Fresh. *WWJD (What Would Jim Do?)*<sup>56</sup> (Figures 8 and 9) was a central feature of the last Pacific Arts Summit. The group show acknowledged the passing of Jim Vivieaere in 2011 and honoured the influence Jim had on Ema and her curatorial practice. She guided her choices, as she does for most shows, by asking herself, “What Would Jim Do?”

*WWJD (What Would Jim Do?)* featured the work of Auckland-based artists Renee Bevan, Rebecca Ann Hobbs, Nigel Borell, Benjamin Work, Vinesh Kumaran, Coco Solids,

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<sup>56</sup> May 10 – June 23, 2012, Fresh Gallery Otara.

Gary Silipa, Sangeeta Singh, and hair cuts by Allan Tonkin (New Flava Barbers).<sup>57</sup> Figure 8 shows a wall of portraits taken by photographer Vinesh Kumaran. Ema and Vinesh have worked together several times over the years. In 2009 at the ASB Polyfest, Vinesh produced full-length images of people expressing themselves through their style. In 2012 Ema and Vinesh moved the focus away from capturing style through clothing alone and toward creative expressions through hair. The wall is comprised of 66 portraits. Allan Tonkin of New Flava Barbers complemented Vinesh's commentary through hair by providing sculpted haircuts in the gallery. Ema found the barber through his strong social media presence and approached him about the project.



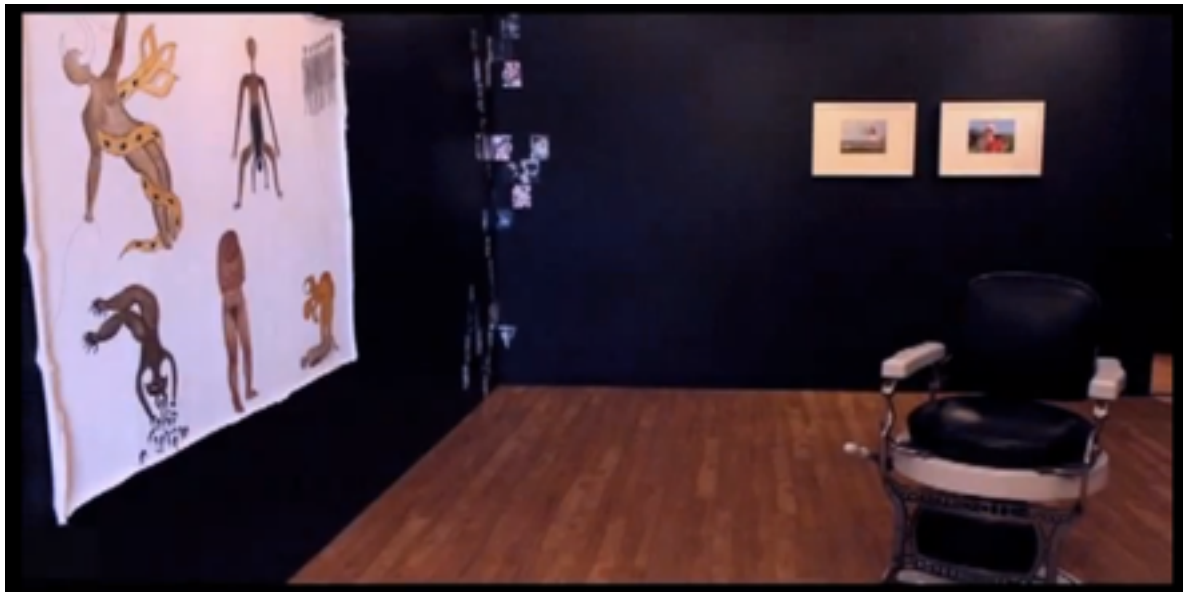
**Figure 8**  
***WWJD (What Would Jim Do?)* exhibition**  
**2012**  
**Still from Tanu Gago's video *WWJD Curated by Ema Tavola***  
**Photos on back wall by Vinesh Kumaran**  
**New Flava Barber: Allan Tonkin**  
**Fresh Gallery Otara**

*Having Allan Tonkin there speaks to the diversity of what creativity is and where creativity lives. It's not just because we put it on the wall of a gallery. He is a creative*

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<sup>57</sup> For a virtual tour through part of the exhibition with commentary from some of the artists and the curator see Tanu Gago's YouTube video *WWJD Curated by Ema Tavola*.

person through how he sculpts the hair, while also working in a commercial business model. I love that he is in the business of making people feel good about themselves. I asked him to come in to give some free haircuts because I knew people would love to watch that and some of the kids that come into the gallery on Saturdays would put their hand up straight away. He took about half an hour to do one hairstyle, and it was like watching living art.<sup>58</sup>



**Figure 9**  
***WWJD (What Would Jim Do?)* exhibition**  
**2012**  
**Still from Tanu Gago's video *WWJD Curated by Ema Tavola***  
**Left: painting by Sangeeta Singh, Centre/Corner: digital prints by Nigel Borell,**  
**Right: photographs by Benjamin Work**  
**Fresh Gallery Otara**

Beyond the barber's chair, Ema chose to juxtapose the 66 smiling faces of the Polyfest Hair Project with Sangeeta Singh's paintings (seen in Figure 9). Sangeeta's paintings are sometimes described as confrontational as they ask audiences to engage in unspoken internalised feelings and thoughts such as the pain of torture. Singh's internalised realities are in conversation with the wall of portraits presenting outward versions of themselves. This

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<sup>58</sup> This text is from Ema's commentary on Tanu Gago's YouTube video *WWJD Curated by Ema Tavola*.

is an example of how *WWJD (What Would Jim Do?)* represented Fresh Gallery Otara's role in showcasing new Oceanic art that “challenges, engages and reflects the unique socio-political context of Otara, South Auckland and Oceania.” After six years Ema moved on from Fresh Gallery Otara to become the Visual Arts Manager at the Mangere Arts Centre, developing programming for two gallery spaces, which acted in concert with the performing arts programming at the Centre. She has since moved out of council work and is now self-employed as a freelance Oceanic art advocate. In a blog post about her resignation from council, Ema wrote, “I’ve been sitting in meetings recently, feeling like a wolf in sheep’s clothing – being a ‘curator’ but thinking like an activist” (“Resignation”). She continues to have a web presence and can be found at [www.PimpiKnows.com](http://www.PimpiKnows.com) and followed on Twitter. Ema’s well-followed web presence is another space she has created as a venue for Oceanic arts. The activist in Ema has perhaps shaped her artistic career all along, curating art as social development.

## OCEANIC ART FOR OCEANIC PEOPLES

Ema's practice of creating "brown spaces" to view "brown art" as a platform for social development is an artistic practice in its own right. Before looking at the limited discourse around brown art in white and brown spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand, consider the creative work of the curator more generally. Curators translate, facilitate, provide context to enable the public's understanding, and they tell stories.

### Curator as Creator

According to Bruce Altshuler, the development of "curator as creator" rose out of a combination of late 1960s counter-culture together with traditional avant-garde impulses. Avant-garde artists developed "radical artistic means" to complement social change movements of the time. And in the spirit of the times, exhibition organisers also subverted the traditional exhibition format:

Like the work displayed, their exhibitions sought to undercut the standard way of framing art for the public, the manner and mode of presentation becoming part of the content presented. In this they were engaged in the same sort of critical enterprise as the artists, and their exhibitions became works on a par with their components. (236)

Altshuler goes on to assert that the phenomenon of curator as creator expanded with the international art world over the next two decades and peaked in the 1980s. The political and ideological circumstances were different from those of the late 1960s counterculture, but the proliferation of large survey and themed exhibitions called for the curator to move into a central role as a creative participant.

Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century curators continue to not only comment on but shape culture. For Okwui Enwezor, artistic director and one of the six co-curators of *Documenta XI* (2002), the issue is, "What is the space of culture today and how can a curator have an important voice in its shaping?" (Thea 57). Enwezor looks at the exhibition as a medium that is part of a



cultural practice. He believes that what comes out of that understanding is an “awareness of how you tell a story, because exhibitions are narrative by nature – one thing after another: sentences, paragraphs, line breaks, punctuation, exclamation marks, etc.” (Thea 52). This awareness of how to tell a story is an empowering tool, as those who have the power to tell a story also have the possibility to change it.

The exhibitions Ema produced at Fresh Gallery Otara told stories by and to members of the South Auckland community. As a curator Ema considers not only the overarching story of an exhibition but also the spatial narrative exhibitions create. Her practice emphasises editing to be sure each work has enough space to express its part of the conversation going on between the works in relation to each other. While curation is a creative practice that often deserves equal attention to the components of an exhibition, Ema’s collaborative approach keeps the spotlight on the artists and the work. The six years Ema spent at Fresh Gallery Otara provided a foundation from which her practice has grown. She also created opportunities for other curators and artists to develop their practices at Fresh, as she allowed Fresh Gallery to act as a platform for ideas. Ema’s commitment to nurture and challenge the Oceanic arts sector earned Ema a Creative New Zealand Pacific Contemporary Arts Award in 2012. Creative New Zealand recognised Ema’s curatorial practice as an artistic practice and commended the innovation within her practice.

Ema has also created online platforms to exhibit, contextualise, and promote Oceanic arts. She has been creating an online presence for her work and interests since 2006. When Ema was in art school, she accidentally took over someone’s blog that was set up as a web-based platform for “the worst art competition.” Ema intended to submit a piece of bad art, but she unintentionally became the site’s administrator and changed the password. Had she not hijacked that website, she would not have thought about starting her own. Ema’s first blog site, [Colourmefiji.com](http://Colourmefiji.com), allowed Ema to engineer her own web presence and also

promote Fresh Gallery Otara because the city council does not allow individual art centres to have their own websites. The platforms she created to explore Oceanic experiences and realities are valuable resources and virtual venues she continues to curate.

### **Brown Art in Brown Spaces/Brown Art in White Spaces**

In his 1996 article “*Korurangi/Toihoukura: Brown Art in White Spaces*” Jonathan Mane-Wheoki discusses two exhibitions featuring contemporary Māori artists: *Korurangi: New Maori Art* curated by George Hubbard and William McAloon,<sup>59</sup> and *Toihoukura* curated by Chris Pihema.<sup>60</sup> *Korurangi* showcased the “young guns,”<sup>61</sup> the then rising stars of contemporary Māori art including Brett Graham, Shane Cotton, and Peter Robinson. The Auckland City Art Gallery scheduled *Korurangi* as its New Gallery’s inaugural exhibition and engaged George Hubbard as the Māori co-curator. To Mane-Wheoki these actions indicate the gallery’s intention to do “the right thing.” As Mane-Wheoki explains, that means:

to accord primacy to the Maori arts in a larger biculturally reconstructed historical and cultural framework by mounting a very important, serious and challenging exhibition of contemporary work by more innovative and established artists who identify as Maori; to signal to Auckland’s tangata whenua a commitment to biculturalism and inclusiveness, that the New Gallery was to be from the outset a space in which Maori and their culture were welcome; to alert the wider community to the development of a distinctive and dynamic artistic expression of the present resurgence of Maori Nationalism and culture; and to align contemporary Maori art with that of resurgent indigenous societies elsewhere (Australia and North America, for instance) as their artists (and writers, musicians, performers,

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<sup>59</sup> Auckland City Art Gallery’s New Gallery, 1 October – 26 November, 1995

<sup>60</sup> Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 26 August – 26 November, 1995

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Mane-Wheoki has described the “young guns” (Shane Cotton, Brett Graham, Michael Parekowhai, Lisa Reihana, Peter Robinson) as university art school trained contemporary Māori artists who gained prominence in the 1990s. In contrast to the late- or mid-career contemporary Māori artists in the 1990s, the young guns began investigating new technologies in their art, much of which “interrogates the past (ancient and colonial) in terms of the post-modern and post-colonial present, and examines such issues as cultural identity and authenticity, racism and, in Reihana’s case, gender” (“Toi Hiko” n. pag.).

film-makers and architects) engage with 'international' culture, on the one hand, while trying to maintain the dignity integrity and continuity of their own cultures, on the other. (44)

As contemporary Oceanic art gained visibility in galleries in Aotearoa New Zealand, Jim Vivieaere found similar attitudes of institutions wanting to “do the right thing.” In his 1996 article “The Island Race in Aotearoa,” two years after *Bottled Ocean*, the group show of contemporary Oceanic art he curated and designed, toured five New Zealand cities, Vivieaere found that institutions were still “caught by a need to both legitimise themselves and acknowledge (and perhaps attempt to control) the art of the migrant communities” (57). Vivieaere’s approach to curating *Bottled Ocean* was to distance the audience by creating an enlarged display case by separating the artwork from the audience with a perspex wall. This mode of display became its own creation through which Vivieaere was responding to viewers’ interest in exoticism when considering Oceania. In conversation with Nicholas Thomas, Vivieaere said he felt the galleries only “wanted brown faces” and were showing *Bottled Ocean* because the galleries “felt obliged to show it, not because it would ever be acquired or displayed on other grounds” (“Exhibit” 326). In an early draft of a statement he wrote about the exhibition, Vivieaere brought up tensions of displaying brown art in white spaces:

Bottled Ocean the concept carries the limitations of a pigeon-hole, the categorisation of Brown Pacific Peoples into a single island of consciousness. For them to be represented in the City Gallery is a sort of back-hand privilege, an acknowledgement of the Polynesian communities at large, while being placed under the scrutiny of a European mainstream art audience. (qtd. in Thomas, “Exhibit” 342).

More than a decade later many of the same issues continue to surface. Ema has described Fresh Gallery Otara as a critique to the mainstream art world “because we don’t want to be the brownie in the corner of the white cube; it’s about being the brown cube.” Creating brown box galleries comes from a place of considering organising principles. Returning to Mane-Wheoki’s observations of two notably different contemporary Māori art

exhibitions raises questions to consider at the institutional level. He felt a powerful wairua Māori at the *Toihoukura* exhibition, and he felt the *Korurangi* exhibition (as distinct from the individual works) “lacked a heart, a pulse, a wairua” (47). He points out that while the artists in *Toihoukura* may not have “the sort of commercial potential art dealers need in order to stay in business,” works were sold and non-Māori New Zealanders were impressed with the exhibition. The difference between the shows was so striking, the ways the shows were put together needs be considered. Mane-Wheoki raises questions, which illustrate the power of the stories curators tell:

Without wanting in any way to cast doubts on the integrity of the twelve co-opted for *Korurangi*, or to undervalue their individualistic achievements, were they the most appropriate artists to carry, collectively, the mana for new Maori art? Or are they the artists whom New Zealand’s non-Maori art establishment wishes to recognise as Maori artists, the artists whom it wants Maori to be – urbanised, possibly detribalised, perhaps geographically and culturally displaced, and internationalist in outlook. What assistance did the Gallery’s own highly professional non-Maori curators need from the Maori co-curator to arrive at this line-up? Are these the artists whom the Maori community would want their artists to be? What selection would an informed Maori curatorium have made? What if the whole enterprise had been underpinned by tikanga Maori? Robert Jahnke has stated: ‘I am a Maori. It is coincidental that I am an artist’ [footnote 14 in the original text, personal communication] – what if that had been the basis for selection? (47)

The questions Mane-Wheoki raises are useful when considering Ema Tavola’s curatorial drivers in the work she did at Fresh Gallery Otago. Because city council-run spaces are charged with first serving the community, the pressure of commercial competition is lifted. In buyer galleries exhibiting other or “just another” brown show, the organisers’ intentions may not be clear. The artists selected to exhibit at Fresh have come from the community to communicate with the community, but somehow recognition from outside the community also continues to find its way in.

But “brown art” in “white spaces” is also beneficial. Group shows of minority art in white spaces has the potential to widen and enrich the cultural outlook of members of the

dominant culture. And validating brown identities in white spaces can also have a positive effect, even if different from the positive effects of validating brown identities in brown spaces. In his meditations on the exhibition *Bottled Ocean*, Nicholas Thomas points out that art exhibitions are “contexts in which identities are not merely displayed and enacted but also affirmed and legitimized” (“Pacific” 47). He goes on to say that broader legitimation comes when the art and art exhibitions are in “mainstream institutions that possess high public visibility” (47). Therefore, exhibiting “brown art” in “white spaces” may contribute to wider acceptance of Oceanic cultures. However, as Thomas also identifies, when mainstream audiences are primarily interested in “the tropical colourfulness of the work, in the apparent conformity of its spirituality with New Age environmentalism, in its exoticism,” artists sometimes respond by “making exoticism visually explicit through the use of readily recognizable Polynesian motifs” (“Pacific” 47-48).<sup>62</sup>

Wanting to “do the right thing” or feeling obliged to show art created by minority artists to legitimise the gallery or institution is part of the problem in how New Zealand views multiculturalism. In her essay “The Maui Dynasty: Confronting Multiculturalism in Contemporary New Zealand Art,” Anna-Marie White has identified this separatist attitude:

The problem with multiculturalism as it is currently expressed within New Zealand art discourses is that it does not promote relationships between cultures or the processes of cross-cultural exchange. Instead, New Zealand art museums have responded to multiculturalism by accommodating other cultural identities in such a way that they remain sub-categories of the dominant group. This not only preserves the power of the dominant group, it also conditions the way in which other cultures are represented according to Western preferences of art. An unequal power dynamic based on cultural stereotypes can be created which creates hostility and resentment between groups and individuals. (42)

White goes on to say that by “perpetuating the hegemonic discourses of multiculturalism, New Zealand art galleries have tried to deny other artists this right to

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<sup>62</sup> Or what Ioane Ioane referred to (in Chapter Ioane) as artists jumping on the bandwagon of a “Pacific Art Renaissance.”

power, to define their own culture and to make their culture matter – both in the past and toward the future” (53).

### **Vasu: Pacific Women of Power**

Exploring diversity in cultural experiences and social development through visual art is not solely about “brown art” and “brown space.” For Ema it is about creating spaces for under-represented (Oceanic) voices. The undeniable male dominance in the visual arts sector in Fiji, when Ema was there in 2000, made plain the extent to which female experiences were underrepresented. The experience of Fiji through visual arts was skewed to a male gaze. This experience, in part, drove Ema to create spaces like Fresh Gallery Otara and web-based platforms where diversity of cultural experiences can be explored. Part of that diversity includes gender.

In Ema’s essay “Safe Space” (for the exhibition catalogue for *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power*) she explains that much of contemporary art in Fiji evolved out of a model at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific, where there was an emphasis on creating work that sold – work that featured an earthy palette that depicted myths and legends. Ema believes that this market-driven economic model for creating contemporary art in Fiji stunted the growth of the movement:

Art defined by economics has created a polarising effect. If good art is defined by that which sells, all art that doesn’t measure up against the established benchmark can and is undervalued and missing from what contemporary visual arts represents of Fiji’s complex socio-cultural landscape. (14)

Participating in *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* aligned perfectly with Ema’s interest in expressions of cultural diversity and art. Ema has found that artwork of women and other marginalised artists in Fiji disrupts and confronts the status quo, while facilitating personal healing. Women’s artwork in Fiji did not fit the established market-driven economic model, but when given the space, much of the work created for *Vasu* did sell. Ema uses her

knowledge of the international art world to encourage acceptance of the grittier artwork of women in Fiji:

Whilst there may be a market for frangipani paintings and imagery that matches lounge suites and beautifies board rooms, the international visual arts industry values honesty, authenticity and visual integrity. The fierceness of what Fiji women artists depict about their lived experience is art world currency. Fiji women artists need to be valued at a local and national level: in many ways they will strengthen Fiji's international profile for all Fiji Islanders. ("Safe Space" 14)

*Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* was curated by Ann Tarte, Cresantia Frances Koya, Jakki Leota-Ete, and Luisa Tora. Ema contributed an essay and a visual work. She maintains her own visual arts practice as a creative outlet and also to keep her knowledge of the creative process current. Keeping up her visual practice bolsters Ema's curatorial process by reminding her what artists might be going through when creating work for exhibitions Ema curates. The *Vasu* exhibition and surrounding events intended to empower women, in part, by being extremely inclusive. Ema is a vocal advocate for the show, but she also felt the exhibition would have been a stronger show if the curators had been a bit more exclusive in their selection process. As a curator, Ema has been innovative in finding a balance between creating a space that welcomes and reflects all in her community and curating shows that include only artists and work that meet a standard in execution and also meet the curatorial brief.

The *Vasu* exhibition did not travel, but it was a catalyst for more exhibitions featuring female Fiji Islander artists. After returning to Aotearoa New Zealand, Ema curated *For Fiji, Ever Fiji*<sup>63</sup> (Figure 10) at Fresh Gallery Otara, in part to introduce New Zealand audiences to the New Zealand-based artists who participated in *Vasu*. Ema's belief in women Fiji Islander artists runs forever deep. The exhibition featured work by Margaret S. Aull, Filani Filina Macassey, Sangeeta Singh, and Luisa Tora, who all showed work in *Vasu*. *For Fiji, Ever Fiji*

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<sup>63</sup> 23 January – 14 February, 2009, Fresh Gallery Otara

also included work by Torika Bolatagici, who is based in Australia. Ema's dedication to these artists continued with the *Fiji Times* exhibition in 2009 (discussed above) at The Salon.



**Figure 10**  
***For Fiji, Ever Fiji* exhibition**  
**2009**  
**Left: photographs from Torika Bolatagici's series *Kurunavanua***  
**Right: Louisa Tora's painting *These Boots were Made for Walking***  
**Fresh Gallery Otara**  
**Photograph by Ema Tavola**



## EMA'S STORIES

I think the world needs to be changed. And, I think artists are agents of change. I love to surround myself with artists who are making work, which tells us more about who we are and makes us question who we are. Artists have always been at the forefront of change, and I kind of sit with them as part of a big picture. Recently at the Pacific Islands Media Association conference, one of the young reporters was asked if she had any advice for young aspiring journalists. She said, "I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to make change." And we were thinking, "You're going to make **no** friends and **no** change, mate. People are gonna run away from you. You weirdo." I am here to make friends because friends are going to help make the change. You can't do it by yourself.

\* \* \* \* \*

I came to New Zealand to get my qualifications, so I could go home and open an art gallery. I also just love an art party, and a biennale is an extension of that. There is a New Zealand artist called Mladen Bizumic, who did a work when I first moved to Auckland, called *Fiji Biennale Pavilions*. I went up to the gallery where he is represented. It's a very exclusive Auckland gallery, where you have to get buzzed in. It's a buyer's gallery. We were just dirty little students. I remember looking at this work, *Fiji Biennale Pavilions*, and it was a really boring, ugly work. It was a criticism of biennale culture, that anyone can have a biennale now. Even Fiji could have one. I was so offended! I wrote for a whole year about how angry I was at this man. I thought, I'm going to do a Fiji Biennale and blow you and your stupid ideas out the water. And I knew that I could do it.

I've got books and books where I've started writing notes. It will be about Pacific contemporary and be out of the gallery, out of the box. Suva doesn't really have a gallery culture, so the artists involved will be the artists who move people. The Suva Biennale can

define its own scope of what contemporary arts is, like an installation at the bus station and we'll paint a bus. There will be a lot of everyday art, but at the same time be a very high art thing, too. I'm imaging there would be a performance poetry component, a tattoo component, film. All these things which are at the opposite end of a gallery-based practice.

It will be a big team effort. It will be political too. It'll be monumental. It will be *the* biennale of the Pacific. I envisage that it will kind of take the place of the contemporary component of the Festival of Pacific Arts, because that doesn't compete.<sup>64</sup> Something I love about the Festival of Pacific Arts is that there's so much going on. It's got culinary arts, tattoo arts, healing arts; it's like a disciplinary orgy.

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We have 300 people through the gallery in one month or three weeks. And every other person is coming in and giving an impression to myself or Nicole<sup>65</sup> about their experience of the exhibition. If, for example, an exhibition talks about child abuse, that dialogue grows and drifts out. We get people in the gallery who say they've come in because someone else told them about it. And the kids that swarm this gallery after 3 o'clock, they're coming in and talking about their experiences. Those experiences are baby steps, but if we weren't doing it, it wouldn't be done. It's about using art as a platform to create awareness and dialogue. It's

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<sup>64</sup> In 1972 the South Pacific Commission (SPC, now Secretariat of Pacific Communities) believed the arts and cultures of the Pacific were under threat of being lost. So they created a festival, put on by and for the peoples of the Pacific, for the promotion and perpetuation of Pacific cultural activities. Because the Festival was created out of the perceived loss or threat of loss of culture, it is not surprising that the Festival focuses on aspects of the arts that focus on heritage rather than stylistically "contemporary" art.

<sup>65</sup> Nicole Lim worked with Ema at Fresh Gallery Otara and then became the Acting Manager when Ema left the gallery to work at the Mangere Arts Centre as the visual arts coordinator. Fresh Gallery Otara underwent major refurbishment from August 2012 through February 2013. The upgraded space, managed by Nicole, is larger and includes a workshop room and café.

not really tangible social development, but look at the exhibitions Janet Lilo had done here.<sup>66</sup> They brought up a lot of issues with older people who don't necessarily use social networking websites like Bebo. It made them really aware of what their kids are exposing themselves to. It just brings those things out into the open. We can't really measure it, but what can be measured are things like the good news stories that come to Otara on behalf of this gallery. Good news stories are very rare because what bleeds leads in our local newspapers. There is so much bad news in South Auckland to report on, but one thing that Fresh Gallery Otara is acknowledged for is that whenever there's a Fresh Gallery Otara story, it's so positive. And in a little way, that's part of building up the community, confidence in ourselves, our creativity, and our ability to assert and just feel confident about who we are. It's such a cliché – Pacific art and identity – but these different shades of identity, different expressions of Pacific identities, that come through in these exhibitions are building awareness in people. And maybe an understanding and tolerance about the fact that there isn't only one, we're a constantly diversifying Pacific experience in New Zealand. Making an exhibition about it formalises it and says that it's real. People can come in here and get a bit of insight into other people's realities.

When I did my solo exhibition last year,<sup>67</sup> I really felt how much I believe in what I'm saying now. To make the work, to hang the work, to promote the show, to stand by the work, and talk to it for three hours on the night, it gave me so much empathy for the artists I work with. I know what they're going through, putting their hearts out there, and exposing themselves (in a good way). It's positive for young people to see because in a lot of Pacific communities, children are to be seen and not heard. So, to validate different experiences is positive because I think a lot of our social problems come out of being culturally lost. Art as

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<sup>66</sup>*Top16*, 20 March – 12 April 2008; *MyFace*, 12 June – 4 July 2009, both at Fresh Gallery Otara

<sup>67</sup> *Blood + Bone*, The Salon, Auckland, December 2009

a platform for social development is about building people up. Our cultural experiences are valid and important, and we're actually players in the way we live.

## Chapter Graham

“Art is whatever you cannot define.”

--Brett Graham

### STORIES OF BRETT

Rather than being pigeonholed into an ethnic-specific category of artist, Brett Graham, like most contemporary artists, probably prefers being referred to as simply an artist. And even though he does not like being described, he does seem comfortable with the label of Māori sculptor or Māori artist. He self-identifies as Ngati Koroki Kahukura and was part of the team that curated the Tainui exhibition at Te Papa, New Zealand’s national museum.

Perhaps being the child of a contemporary Māori artist made it possible to feel comfortable with such designations. By the time Brett was born in 1967, his father Fred Graham was a practising artist. Fred Graham and his contemporaries, many of whom were close friends, became iconic figures in the first wave of contemporary Māori art.<sup>68</sup> Brett grew up under the influence of that generation of Māori artists.<sup>69</sup>

*The tradition I was most conscious of was through my father’s generation. These men, mainly men, some women, were incredibly passionate about that notion of transforming mainstream society—Pākehā society. The idea that they could transform all of those underlying myths of what New Zealand-ness is in order to promote Māoridom, in order to have our beliefs, our culture, recognised rather than kept underground and kept trampled on underfoot.*

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<sup>68</sup> For biographical information on artists of that generation of contemporary Māori artists see Mataira, Mane-Wheoki (“Gordon Tovey”), Smith.

<sup>69</sup> Brett embraces both sides of this bi-cultural heritage. He has visited Cholesbury, Buckinghamshire, the place of his European ancestors. And, he knows his mother is waiting for him to do a piece about Dargaville, where four generations of the family had a farm.

*There was a real passion and joy in telling those stories that hadn't been told. Telling those stories about Parihaka, about Te Kooti, all those figures in New Zealand history that were deemed as rebels were actually heroes in their eyes. Their legacy is that we have something to fight against. Some of us are still challenging mainstream perceptions, that they're the only culture in the land. The real struggle of people like Selwyn Muru and Para Matchitt, who were incredibly creative, is that they have never really been valued as much as they should have been, or my father. Even today if you went down the street and you asked someone, even Māori, to name one Māori artist from the last century, the 1900s, they wouldn't be able to tell you. That's just the reality. And yet these would be the geniuses of the day that came up with the innovations that we now know as Māori art.*

*My experience of art had always been through my father and his friends, and making art was always a joyous, laughing experience, a passionate experience. I also inherited a certain chip on my shoulder from my father's generation of artists, the belief that suffering is good, that pain and suffering produces great art, which may well be misguided. I don't know. It's inherited from people like Selwyn Muru who were deeply suspicious of the Pākehā hierarchy. I think it is partly founded in reality. They used to say constantly that without that fight, without that struggle, there's no passion, there's nothing to work for. That's where my fight comes from.<sup>70</sup>*

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<sup>70</sup> In 2006 Brett Graham co-curated *Aukaha: 40 Years of Maori Contemporary Art* (Waikato Museum, 27 May - 9 July, 2006), an exhibition honouring the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first group show of Māori art held in Hamilton in 1966. The artists included Sandy Adsett, John Bevan Ford, Fred Graham, Ralph Hotere, Para Matchitt, Katerina Mataira, Selwyn Muru, Buck Nin, Cliff Whiting, and Arnold Wilson. Brett's deep respect and admiration comes through in his essay for the exhibition: The artists who participated in this ground-breaking exhibition were artists of stature and they have gone on to redefine the meaning of art in this country. They have tenaciously retold the histories of Aotearoa with an indigenous voice, while others have looked overseas for inspiration. They have addressed issues at the core of our nation's identity such as bi-culturalism and racial tension, before it became fashionable. Their legacy can be measured by the number of Maori artists and students that follow in their wake, and the emergence of Maori art schools such as Te Toi Hou Kura, Te Putahi a Footnote continues on next page.

While Brett has taken on board the fight against Pākehā hierarchy in New Zealand art, his work also takes on a broader view of the world. This expansion may have had beginnings when Brett was eleven years old, and Fred Graham took his family to Enumclaw, Washington for one year on a teachers' exchange. At a young age, Brett experienced first hand international indigenous art.

*That was quite an adventure in a lot of ways, realising how big the world was and how New Zealand was pretty insignificant. And in a small way, being conscious of the Native Americans and the strong tradition of wood carving in Vancouver in the northwest. My father was very conscious of looking at collections. We certainly were conscious of their art, and it wasn't too much later that he actually made connections with indigenous Americans. There was a guy who had a big collection of indigenous masks and I remember being fascinated by these masks, the ones that tell stories and open up to make another character, like a raven or a bear. And then we went to Vancouver for a week. There was this fantastic museum there of northwestern artefacts. It was just fantastic because you saw how big the world was. We did a big summer trip and drove through California and went as far as Tijuana. It wasn't exactly high culture, but it was enough to see that the world was a big place and made me always want to travel after that.*

Back in New Zealand, Brett had a fascination with the history and the members of the Young Maori Party (YMP), looking for positive Māori role models who functioned in both a Māori capacity and a Pākehā capacity. He says that as a child it was easy to feel not accepted by both worlds, but as an adult he sees the richness of it and sees going between the worlds as a real joy. While the YMP's main focus was on improving Māori health and welfare within New Zealand, Brett's fascination with one of its members, Peter Buck/Te Rangi Hiroa, led

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Toi, Toi Mai Rangi and Te Toi Hou that proudly proclaim 'Contemporary Maori art' as their mandate. (*Aukaha* n. pag.)

him to Hawai‘i in 1989 for postgraduate study after completing the BFA programme at Elam School of Fine Arts.

*When I walked through the doors to the art school [at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa], the first work I saw was a nude with her arm flung back, and she was on a dolphin. I thought, “What the hell have I done?” But the saving grace was being surrounded by so many Pacific scholars, people like Terri [Teresia] Teaiwa. There was a real powerhouse of Pacific scholars there. A lot of the people who are writing about the Pacific now, or have been for the last 10-15 years, I was aware of or knew at that time. I also had a real affinity with the Hawaiians I met, like John Osorio. Being taught by Haunani Kay Trask was influential. This was before the centenary of the overthrow so that Hawaiian consciousness wasn’t as strong as it was about to get. It was just on the cusp, so it made it quite a fascinating time to be there.<sup>71</sup>*

*In New Zealand, twenty years ago [when Brett left for Hawai‘i] if you were Māori or part Māori, it was definitely hard to make in-roads to the Pacific community.<sup>72</sup> That has changed now to a certain extent. But by going to Hawai‘i, you were just one of many. In the Pacific students group at the University of Hawai‘i, for example, there’d be Sāmoans, Fijians, Tongans, the rest of it, the odd Japanese. But you were all on the same level; you were visitors to this place Hawai‘i. So it was more comfortable to talk about the relationship between Māori and Sāmoans than it was in New Zealand. That never really*

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<sup>71</sup> In 1893 the internationally recognised monarchy of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i was overthrown by American and European businessmen who were living in Hawai‘i. Issues around this illegal takeover and Hawaiian sovereignty are still contentious in Hawai‘i. Part of what may have contributed to the strong Hawaiian consciousness Brett refers to is the 1993 impassioned speech Haunani-Kay Trask made at the centenary of the overthrow, where she named the United States of America the enemy of Hawaiians.

<sup>72</sup> For more on interactions, or lack thereof, between Māori and other Oceanic peoples in New Zealand, see McIntosh.



*existed here, or it existed with some difficulty. My fascination for Oceania/the Pacific came from challenging the notions at that time that all our experiences [as New Zealanders] related back to England. At that time, Michel Tuffery and I, and others as well, were very conscious of looking at the Pacific in its broader context.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps looking broader, more to Polynesia than other areas of the Pacific, but certainly looking at Polynesia, and those commonalities that we shared.*

*Artists like myself and Michel Tuffery would consciously go into the museums and draw Pacific taonga<sup>74</sup> – these beautiful things that we saw from the Pacific – with a very conscious attempt to incorporate them into our work, especially in the 1980s when people were paying lip service to them and not actually looking deeply into these things that you see in the museums.<sup>75</sup> I wouldn't like to think that I'd copy things directly, but there's certainly been an infusion based on their simplicity of form from looking at those taonga and how powerful they are. It's definitely entered into the blood stream.*

*It's such a vast area, and there is no one overriding aesthetic in the Pacific, but I think the work is very conscious of a Pacific mentality. I think there is definitely an island mentality that's different from a continental mentality. I'm very conscious of the Pacific. A statement that Terri Teaiwa made once in a letter was that "it's your job as an artist to make powerful Pacific symbols."<sup>76</sup> I think, as a conscious aim, that has always been in the*

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<sup>73</sup> Michel Tuffery is a New Zealand-based artist of Sāmoan, Rarotongan, and Tahitian heritage.

<sup>74</sup> Taonga is usually glossed from Māori as something that is treasured, whether tangible or intangible.

<sup>75</sup> Part of following Peter Buck's trail to Hawai'i included spending time at the Bishop Museum. Brett regards having access to the Bishop Museum collections as one of the benefits of his time in Hawai'i. As director of the Bishop Museum from 1936 to 1951, Buck "concentrated on Polynesian arts and crafts because he felt this was a neglected field" (Bishop Museum).

<sup>76</sup> Brett recently came across the letter from Teresia and discovered that he had been misquoting her for years. The imperative to make "powerful Pacific symbols" was not specifically in the letter, but that was the message Brett took away from the letter when he first read it.

*back of my mind. It is our role to create powerful Pacific symbols how ever they may be. It's certainly something that I strive for.*

Going to the University of Hawai‘i was not only a turning point for Brett in terms of seeing Māori in a larger Oceanic context through interactions with Oceanic scholars, Brett also met lecturers like Karen Kosasa who sharpened his critical thinking through the writings of Frantz Fanon and Jacques Derrida. Going to Hawai‘i also facilitated an opportunity for Brett to study in Japan with sculptor Atsuo Okamoto.

Brett had been to Japan a few years earlier (in 1986) for only three days. From that first visit, he was left with the impression that Japanese had a “Pacific” sensibility closer to Māori than Pākehā. He felt an “island mentality” in Japan which resonated with him. He was impressed that Japanese maintained a strong bond with their ancestors while also living in and creating one of the most technologically advanced societies in the world. The Shinto belief that spirit inhabits natural objects also resonated with Brett, as it is not altogether dissimilar to the Māori belief that everything has a mauri or life force.<sup>77</sup>

The visit to Japan to conduct fieldwork for his Masters degree was Brett’s third, and “opened up” his sculptural practice. From the time he spent with Okamoto, Brett acquired technical skills in working with stone, but, more importantly, Okamoto encouraged Brett to consider things differently. It was a critical moment in his practice as a sculptor.

*My experience with Atsuo Okamoto was a turning point. I'd come from an art school culture where everything was on the surface. Then he suddenly did my head in by saying, “No, everything is within.” So his artwork was about internalising everything and not showing everything. Yet that seemed to be the purpose of art, to show everything. But*

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<sup>77</sup> Sokyo Ono describes Shinto as “the indigenous faith of the Japanese people” (1). The entrances of faiths such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism into Japan can be traced to approximate times in history. However, Shintō is believed to be a “native” faith of Japan. Both Shinto and Māori spiritual traditions show great reverence for nature, where natural objects are regarded as containing sacred spirits.

*with Atsuo all of the “good stuff” as it were, was inside his forms, which he led me to believe came from a Japanese aesthetic. That was one of those life-changing moments.*

*Atsuo insisted on never taking anything for granted and questioning all assumptions. He tells a story about how as a young sculptor he had been asked to take part in a sculpture park. All of the other sculptors were older, and they had designed a pathway and decided the sculptures would go along it, a bit like a piece of jewellery. Atsuo instead wanted to challenge people’s whole perceptions of how they walk and where they walk. He wanted to build a pathway to go over a stream and stop halfway over, mid-stream, to make people literally stop and think. But of course this was outrageous to these people, and they never went with it.*

While keeping the “good stuff” of a work on the inside seems to oppose Brett’s commitment to surface decoration, he has taken Atsuo Okamoto’s directive to make people stop and think. Many political issues have served as catalysts for Brett’s work. After returning from Hawai‘i in 1992, Brett’s first New Zealand solo exhibition, *1492-1642*,<sup>78</sup> was informed, in part, by Native American responses to the planned celebrations of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus “discovering” America. 1492 references that event. 1642 refers to Abel Tasman’s arrival in Aotearoa. The exhibition title not only links distant cultures but encourages the viewer to think about the impact of imperialism across space and time.

Brett was making cross-cultural connections in that first solo show, not only by drawing parallels between the indigenous peoples of America and those of Aotearoa, but also by situating Māori within a greater Oceania. *Te Manu* (Figure 11) is the first sculpture of the seven that comprised the show. Together they tell a narrative commenting on colonisation

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<sup>78</sup> In 1992 at Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland; in 1993 the exhibition toured three venues: Sargeant Gallery (Wanganui), Waikato Museum of Art and History (Hamilton), Gisborne Museum and Arts Centre (Gisborne); in 1994 Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

around the world. *Manu* means bird in several Oceanic languages (including Māori) and is often regarded as sacred in Oceanic mythology. The exhibition catalogue/pamphlet makes specific reference to the Korotangi, the bird that guided Brett's Tainui ancestors to Aotearoa, but it also describes how a bird, or the concept of a bird, is incorporated in navigational voyaging in Micronesian and Hawaiian cultures. Although the exhibition pamphlet describes the essence of Brett's sculpture as "deeply rooted in his heritage as a Maori artist" (Darrow n. pag.), and it is, the knowledge he gained as an eleven-year old seeing how big the world is may have helped ground the roots of his heritage.



**Figure 11**  
**Brett Graham**  
***Te Manu* [centre]**  
**1993**  
**Wood and graphite**  
**900 x 2540 mm**  
**Left: *Te Kakano***  
**Right: *Te Puawaitanga I***  
**Image provided by the artist.**

The two and a half metre tall wood and graphite sculpture indicates a bird figure in abstracted simplicity. The series of seven sculptures, according to Darrow, frame a history of Māori art through a narrative of a plant's lifecycle. *Te Manu* is the first in the series not only because it references Oceanic mythological time, but also because migratory birds deliver seeds to new worlds. *Te Manu* represents the first arrival of people to Aotearoa from greater Oceania. The other sculptures in the series take the viewer through “the story of indigenous peoples of the world” (Darrow n. pag.) The metaphors in the work move from the seed brought by *Te Manu* through maturity and strength that are interrupted by domineering explorers and also the turning point in Māori art history, from 1800 when enormous changes threatened the culture.<sup>79</sup> The last two sculptures in the series, *Te Matenga* and *Waka Tumanako*, reference death and also eternal life. *Te Matenga* is a dead cabbage tree (*cordyline australis*), representing the possible death of a culture. Darrow notes, “Just as the native forests of New Zealand were so widely destroyed last century, so the spirit of the people has been suffering this century.” *Waka Tumanako*, on the other hand, moves toward a hopeful future. The wood and graphite sculpture is a vessel in the shape of a Māori coffin, suggesting the journey a spirit goes through – life, death, and the return to Hawaiki.<sup>80</sup> The tumanako flower in the vessel is a symbol of hope. According to Darrow, the narrative framed by the sculptures “has no end, just as a spirit cannot die. The Waka looks to a time of greater strength and understanding – to *Te Manu* and beyond.” *Waka Tumanako* also links the end with the beginning at *Te Manu*, in that they are both vessels.

Whether from within or looking beyond the borders of Aotearoa and into greater Oceania, Brett often integrates scholarly research or develops artwork out of a piece of

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<sup>79</sup> Darrow's comments on the growth stages of Māori art are informed by Mead's “Ka Tupu te Toi Whakairo ki Aotearoa: Becoming Maori Art.”

<sup>80</sup> Here Hawaiki refers to a spiritual homeland.

research. As Michael Dunn notes, “Brett Graham is an artist who has read extensively about sculpture and the issues surrounding First Nations art. He has written papers on the subject and attended conferences around the world” (“New Zealand” 141). Brett’s research, however, is not limited to sculpture or art. Instead, art is a venue to voice his politicised research outcomes.

In Brett’s 1996 solo exhibition, *Bravo Bikini*<sup>81</sup> (Figure 12) was informed by Teresia Teaiwa’s article “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans.” Teaiwa’s piece highlights the erasure of Bikini Islander history by nuclear testing which dispossessed people of their land and by the naming of the two-pieced commodity after the atoll. Bikini Islanders were exposed to radiation during U.S. nuclear testing. The exhibition reminded viewers that the former residents of Bikini Atoll and their descendants still can not return to their homeland. The twenty-six truncated figures, which represent the twenty-six atolls in the Bikini Group, are suspended on the wall in four rows and not presented whole. Some are missing the head, others arms or legs, perhaps referencing deformities incurred by those exposed to radiation.



**Figure 12**  
**Brett Graham**  
***Bravo Bikini* (detail)**  
**1996**  
**26 pieces, cement plaster**  
**smallest 300x150x100 mm**  
**largest 400x150x100 mm**  
**Image provided by the artist.**

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<sup>81</sup> New Work Studio, Wellington, November – December 1996

The white cement plaster figures lack specific features, which may comment on “decisions made by faceless white government bureaucrats, and references to mannequins which display bikinis for consumers” (Norris 103). However, the figures are not generic mannequins. They reference the Kave ancestor tino aitu figures from Nukuoro in Micronesia. Brett was drawn to how the figurative wooden sculptures of this Polynesian outlier had a simplified aesthetic because they are informed by sea voyaging technology of Micronesia. The figures are specific to the region.

*My dealer is always telling me to do some stuff that's practical and not so political, and it would certainly make my life easier. I probably wouldn't be able to live with myself then, so I make what I want to make. Rather than working to maintain a certain level in the career, it's better to make work because of that real need to make it. Going to the Sydney Biennale [in 2010] was a great confirmation that I'm on the right track. The work got a great response and it was read in a broader context, a world context, not just a New Zealand context. Seeing the work in that environment was a great confirmation.*

At the 17<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney<sup>82</sup> Brett presented two large sculptures. *Te Hokioi* (2008) (Figure 13) is a stealth bomber and *Mihaia* is a BRDM-2 Scout Car. The surfaces of both are carved with Māori kowhaiwhai designs, which connect Brett's work to generations of Māori carvers. The surface decoration also subverts the vehicles' objective of mass destruction. Using ancestral designs speaks to the transformative power of traditional cultures. It also speaks to the responsibility Brett has taken on: “We must maintain the concepts of our ancestors for on our shoulders rides the values and many manifestations of creativity we inherit” (“Seeing Twice” 24).

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<sup>82</sup> 12 May – 1 August, 2010



**Figure 13**  
**Brett Graham**  
*Te Hokioi*  
 2008

MDF, fibreglass, steel, car lacquer, wheels  
 800x2900x4400 mm

Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Gallery, 2009.  
 Image provided by the artist.



**Figure 14**  
**Brett Graham**  
*Foreshore Defender*  
 2008

Cast iron  
 1980x864 mm

Image provided by the artist.



*Te Hokioi* is not the only stealth bomber Brett has adopted or adapted. *Foreshore Defender* (Figure 14) is a sculpture cast in metal in the shape of another stealth bomber. After seeing stealth bombers frequenting the American air base on Palau, Brett imagined that Tainui could have their own stealth bombers. Tainui's Treaty of Waitangi claim (signed in 1995) included the Te Rapa Airbase in Hamilton. In Palau the stealth bombers are locally referred to as "flying bats." With *Foreshore Defender*, Brett is invoking the spirit of the Oceanic "flying fox" bat to defend Tainui territory and rights. As Anna-Marie White notes, "The rauponga carved motif on the surface of this stealth bomber proclaims Brett's intention to appropriate this power. It also references the tradition of carving rifle butts for the same purposes during the early colonial and Land Wars period of New Zealand" ("Maui" 36).

The name *Foreshore Defender* also leads the viewer to the water. Brett has long held the ocean as a cultural site. While *Foreshore Defender* invokes the flying fox, it is also employed, in Brett's imagination, as a high-tech scanner searching for Hui Te Ananui, the original site of carving and the house of the god of the sea. Brett's 2009 exhibition *Searching for Tangaroa*, which included screenprint designs of *Foreshore Defender* and *Te Hokioi*, explored a space where ancient and contemporary beliefs and technologies converge. The scanners' work of constant examination is also a metaphor for the human search for meaning.

Making sense of things through creative expression has always been with Brett. He knew from an early age that he would be an artist. His family also always knew he would be an artist. His early experiences of art were through the emphasis his father's generation of artists placed on the joy of making, but there was a point when he realised creativity was not a natural part of life in mainstream New Zealand society.

*My father and some of his friends were Māori All Blacks and also artists. That was a real anomaly at the time in New Zealand society because "real men" that played rugby and chopped down trees didn't actually do that poofy stuff like art, whereas the idea of having*

*flair in all aspects of your life seemed appropriate for Māori. It wasn't a poofy thing, it was a natural part of life.*

While art may have provided Brett with a means to express flair, he also looks at sculpting as a process of finding solutions. Another turning point from Brett's stay in Hawai'i reminds him to stay on the path of finding solutions.

*An older Hawaiian gentleman asked me a question, and I answered with, "I don't know." He turned around and said, "Polynesians never say 'I don't know' they go and find out the answer." It reminded me of stories that I had grown up with about Maui-tiki-a-Taranga. In Polynesia there's always a trickster figure, so in spite of all those notions that are set in stone about whakapapa/genealogy that define leadership, there's always a possibility of escape from this trickster called Maui. There was always a way out. You didn't always have to be the oldest son, you didn't have to be born into an aristocratic family, you didn't have to do all these things, instead you could actually rely on your wit and your cheekiness, and so you would never say, "I don't know." You would go and look for the answer and come back with the answer, and that's what Maui did. That's why he rediscovered fire, that's why he discovered the meaning of death, which ultimately killed him. But he found the answer to all of those things. He never said, "I don't know." So that's why I can't say, "I don't know" to any of your questions.*

## TRICKSTER STORIES

Even though Brett graciously answered my questions and stopped himself from saying, “I don’t know,” he also inserted his own cheekiness by answering specific questions in a general way or subtly redirecting the conversation.<sup>83</sup> When he was remembering his time in Hawai‘i, late 1980s early 1990s, he said, “At that time any sort of theoretical thinking around Pacific artists was new and exciting. It was before all the academics toked it.” He sounded a bit resentful of “academics,” and I took that comment as his cheeky way of saying that what academics, like me, are doing around Oceanic art is not exciting. And after talking about creative thinking for about an hour, when I asked him what turns him off creatively (from the Proust questionnaire), he said, “Maybe over-theorising about the creative process.” Brett’s playful subversion introduced trickster to this thesis,<sup>84</sup> and Brett’s memories of Maui stories and the Native American or First Nations masks he saw that opened into animals like ravens created space for talking trickster stories.

### Trickster Discourse

In Native American stories, Paul Radin has found the trickster to take the form of animals such as the raven, coyote, hare, spider, or fox but points out the importance of remembering that the trickster “basically possesses no well-defined or fixed form” (xxiv). Tricksters are often thought of as shape shifters. The Marshallese trickster god Letao is a disembodied spirit who inhabits various beings. The Caribbean/West Indian trickster, Anancy, takes the

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<sup>83</sup> Fontana and Fey have commented that “while being interviewed, it is not uncommon for a respondent to deliberately try to please the interviewer or, alternatively, to try to prevent the interviewer from learning something” (650).

<sup>84</sup> Trickster was actually part of this thesis from the beginning. Not only are each of the artists their own sort of trickster, but a trickster chose the artists for me. My unconscious mind selected the artists to ask to participate in this thesis, but it did not communicate the reasons to my conscious mind until nearly all the research was done. Whenever people asked why I had chosen the five artists, I could only stumble through an inarticulate statement about transformation. Trickster had taken my tongue.

form of a spider but is thought of as a human. The Oceanic trickster demi-god Maui has been known to change himself into the form of a bird when it suited the deed.

Tricksters have different names and forms, and are not always referred to as tricksters, but crafty characters surely know every culture. Radin speaks to the wide distribution of the trickster:

The Trickster myth is found in clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the complex. We encounter it among the ancient Greeks, the Chinese, the Japanese and in the Semitic world. Many of the Trickster's traits were perpetuated in the figure of the medieval jester, and have survived right up to the present day [1956] in the Punch-and-Judy plays and in the clown. (xxiii)

Trickster narratives are found around the world. They are rarely what they seem at first glance. Trickster myths serve as satire on social convention, an opportunity to voice protest. The entertaining stories of subversion often contain useful lessons or impart knowledge. Tricksters help us see into the heart of things. We recognise the creative trickster by his effects on others' minds.<sup>85</sup> The trickster reduces those around him to a state of bewilderment and even helpless rage. Radin reminds us that the existence of the trickster is "an attempt by man to solve his problems inward and outward" (xxiv). Carl Jung asserts the myth of the trickster was preserved and developed because, like many other myths that have endured time, it was supposed to have a therapeutic effect (207).

Jung refers to the trickster as a personal "shadow" that is "in part descended from a numinous collective figure. This collective figure gradually breaks up under the impact of civilization, leaving traces in folklore which are difficult to recognize" (202). This shadow part of the ego is made up of aspects of personality that social training has taught us to sublimate. When we forget the training of sublimation and the trickster appears, he gives us

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<sup>85</sup> Most trickster figures are male. Hyde found one female trickster, working along side male tricksters, in Native American Hopi and Tewa Pueblo Indian lore, but in other matrilineal and matrilocal tribes the trickster is still always male.

“that extra bit of energy for stepping outside of one’s frame and seeing one’s life from a radically new perspective. He also provides that amount of treachery necessary to be disloyal to an old pattern and find one’s way into a new one” (Beebe 36). Jungian psychiatrist John Beebe also reminds us, the trickster “wants to penetrate the level of our gut responses, just where we are most sentimental and vulnerable, and by disturbing us force us all to reconsider our complacency” (54). This trickster of non-complacency is no stranger to Brett.

*As artists we strive for moments of discovery. We’re generally quite unsatisfied with the things we do. That’s what makes us continue working, because we’re always trying to solve those problems. And if we’re not, we should be because as soon as we become complacent about something working, it’s kind of a death in a way. If I’m lucky, I **might** be satisfied with something I’ve made for about three seconds afterwards. If it goes on any longer than that, I start to get worried because it means I’ve stayed in the same place. I’m never really worried about people pinching ideas, not that they do, but by the time they would have been pinched, I should be at another place.*

Brett may be referring to moving on or staying in the same place in his work or headspace, but the trickster is often introduced while he is on the road, on the move, or in the midst of a journey. Moving between places is one of trickster’s special qualities. As Beebe notes, “liminality is a hallmark of the trickster” (34). In Lewis Hyde’s discussion on Turner’s thoughts on liminality, Hyde points out that a mind that enters liminality willingly “will proliferate new structures, new symbols, new metaphors, not to mention new musical instruments”<sup>86</sup> (130). As Brett has taken on Teresia Teaiwa’s imperative to create powerful Oceanic symbols, he has entered the workspace of the trickster.

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<sup>86</sup> Here Hyde is referring to his earlier discussion on how Antonio Stradivari made violins out of a pile of broken, waterlogged oars.

Beebe also notes that the liminality of the trickster actually serves to reveal what one's true limits are, serving a function that is helpful rather than poisonous (53). Hyde agrees that the trickster is a "lord of in-between," one who can move between heaven and earth, between the living and dead (6). However, Hyde has also realised that trickster not only crosses boundaries:

for there are also cases in which trickster *creates* a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight. In several mythologies, for example, the gods lived on earth until something trickster did caused them to rise into heaven. Trickster is thus the author of the great distance between heaven and earth; when he becomes the messenger of the gods it's as if he has been enlisted to solve a problem he himself created. In a case like that, boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another, and the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found – sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms. (*italics in original*, 7-8)

Creating and crossing boundaries are ways in which unique intersections emerge. Brian Street believes that trickster tales reflect a society's distinctiveness:

Fundamentally trickster tales represent the way a society defines its boundaries, states its rules and conventions (by showing what happens when the rules are broken), extracts order out of chaos and reflects on the nature of its own identity, its differentiation from the rest of the universe. (104)

Trickster characters exist across cultures but also vary between cultures. Therefore, drawing generalisations may be shortsighted, but similar features do emerge. Traci L. Morris-Carlsten, who is most familiar with First Nations tricksters, offers the following characteristics:

Conceptual attributes of the Trickster or Trickster signs include: irony; humor; multiple meanings; subversion of meaning; transgression of cultural boundaries; hybrid or syncretic acts; controversial images; ambiguous meanings; absurd or grotesque meanings; acts of play, teasing or satire; double images that mean two things at once or double acts like Native artists who use broken English to sell the image when speaking with a possible customer. In short, Trickster signs are everywhere in the language, literature, oral traditions, and the art of peoples who survive colonialism with a sense of humor. (81)

Lewis Hyde also reminds us that trickster's style is not always so elevated, after all breaking social contracts is part of his subversion. Hyde says of trickster that at "the meal after the funeral, he makes the first off-color joke" (90). Trickster is also often the first one to make fun of himself. Trickster is cunning with traps but not so cunning to avoid them himself. The Oceanic trickster demi-god Maui for example meets his death by trying to trick the goddess Hine-nui-te-po, in the Aotearoa version of the Maui cycle.

### **Maui**

Maui, the prankish demi-god (half man, half god) is most well known in the area referred to as Polynesia, but Katharine Luomala found that the parallelogram covering 13 million square miles of the Pacific Ocean, where Maui is known also includes parts of Melanesia and Micronesia (4-5). Oceanic peoples have been talking story about Maui for centuries. As is consistent with talking story, Luomala points out that there is "no single 'true' account of the events in Maui's career" (11). Her research into Maui and his biographers found that Maui crossed islands, cultures, and social standing:

Each island, each social class in an island, each narrator tells somewhat different versions of Maui's biography. Maui is a favorite of the common man, and stories about him are told principally at informal gatherings. However, dignified and solemn Polynesian priests, who were official keepers of the genealogies and traditions, could not ignore a person, beloved though he might be of a lower class, if he were a wonder-worker, a miracle man, a sorcerer who altered the original form of the world and vanquished gods who had made the universe and laid down rules for human beings. The priests had their own versions of Maui's career. (11)

Maui defied the gods and enriched humans by stealing fire, raising the sky, slowing the sun's passage across the sky, killing monsters, fishing up lands, and numerous other courageous acts of adventure. Despite the many versions of Maui throughout Oceania, Luomala has found that the hero's personality traits are fairly consistent. He is known as "a happy-go-lucky young culture hero, transformer, and trickster.... Maui is predominantly a defier of precedent, a remodeler of the world and its society, and a mischievous, adolescent

trickster.... he is a capricious and mischievous youth, whose modifications of existing conditions are carried out as tricks against authority” (28). Maui is not limited to just one kind of trick. One of the names he is known as is Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks. He meddles with gods, nature, and human beings.

Even though tricksters lie, cheat, and steal, these acts contribute to the completion of important tasks such as moving in the space between heaven and earth. Trickster may be amoral, but trickster stories are generally viewed as serving a purpose. Beebe compares the activation of the trickster archetype to a manic episode with one crucial difference: the artist who unleashes a disturbance still has a sense of ethics, whereas, an “ethical sense does not seem to be present in the manic patient when he is out of control” (31). Even though the trickster’s actions can be compared to those of a psychopath, trickster is a culture hero. His actions – inventing fish traps, gifting fire to humans, subverting the sun – have a status that no psychopath’s actions reach.

Luomala describes Maui as being compelled to “revolt against the mysteries and limitations of earthly life” (33). Even though Maui’s intentions may have been to please himself in knowing he had outsmarted gods, more so than pleasing the humans he gifted many things to, he was perhaps the ultimate agent of change. Maui’s brothers saw no need for changing the world. They saw his behaviour as juvenile. As Luomala explains Maui’s brothers would have left things up to the gods:

It was admittedly trying to have so little sunlight that sand got mixed into the food, and so little air from the overhanging skies that people constantly coughed from the smoke, and so little standing room that they crawled along the ground like animals. But the gods had made it that way. In their good time and if it suited them they would change it. (34)

In the Māori version of Maui’s birth, he was discarded, thought to be stillborn (sometimes referred to as an abortion), wrapped in his mother’s hair. Maui survived his birth, but he was never entirely accepted in the world of gods or the world of humans. He



was an outside observer to the unquestioned ways of the world, into which he had never been fully indoctrinated. As an outsider Maui had the perspective to question situations or claim responsibilities he had been denied. In doing so, Maui created disorder for the purpose of creating new patterns. Tricksters throughout the world focus their attention on values that have been discarded or things that have been forgotten or excluded.

One way Maui changed the quality of life for humans was by snaring the sun. The sun used to move across the sky so quickly that it was impossible to dry sheets of barkcloth or properly prepare food. Maui decided to make the sun move more slowly. In the Hawaiian version of the story, Maui's mother makes strong ropes for him to noose around the legs of the sun as it rises, and he receives a magical club from his blind grandmother with which he beats the sun until the sun promises to move more slowly. In the Aotearoa version of the story, Maui convinces his brothers, to whom it never occurred to question the shortness of the day, to help him snare the sun and the weapon Maui uses against the sun is made from the jawbone of his ancestor. Because the sun was so badly beaten, he was never able to travel as fast as before. Because Maui's acts of impudence and violence resulted in benefit to humankind, this story is one that supports his position as a hero. Luomala reminds us, "Maui never created anything from nothing. He was a culture hero, a transformer who changed the facilities of the world which others had already created" (29).

### **Artist as Trickster**

Both the trickster and the artist are adept at creating and unmasking deceit. Challenging mainstream perceptions is, in part, the work of the trickster. Anna-Marie White curated *The Maui Dynasty* at The Suter Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū in 2008,<sup>87</sup> in part, to challenge

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<sup>87</sup> *The Maui Dynasty: The Fifth Goodman-Suter Contemporary Art Project 2008*, 13 December 2008 – 29 March 2009

mainstream perceptions of multicultural discourses in New Zealand.<sup>88</sup> *The Maui Dynasty* recognises Asian, Pacific Island, and Māori cultures as part of the same lineage. It takes the name of the Oceanic demi-god Maui and uses the Asian convention of naming dynastic periods, which also privileges whakapapa. It positions the migratory story of Māori, coming from Asia and moving through Oceania in equal importance to New Zealand's colonial history. *The Maui Dynasty* called on trickster artists (whom White identified as “mediators of change”) to look at how cultures from the Maui Dynasty lineage have influenced contemporary New Zealand art. Brett Graham was one of those artists.<sup>89</sup> His contribution to the exhibition was *Foreshore Defender* (Figure 14).

Brett seemed well positioned to participate in this exhibition which challenged New Zealand's lack of cross-cultural engagement in its approach to multiculturalism. More than a decade earlier, in 1994, Brett presented a paper at the conference *Bi-Culturalism, Multi-Culturalism and the Visual Arts*<sup>90</sup> (papers published in 1995), in which Brett's interpretation of bi-culturalism included relinquishing power and acknowledging obligations to one another. Living in what Brett has described as New Zealand's “monocultural existence,” particularly the culture of university art schools into the 1990s, gave Brett many opportunities to focus, as tricksters do, on things that have been discarded or excluded. At that 1994 conference, Brett laid down the challenge to put aside “the tired eyes of monoculturalism.” He spoke of a real fear of indigenous cultures being lost, and with the loss of one's culture “disappears the uniqueness of a world view, the ability to formulate thought from a rich vocabulary of visual and spoken language, and the joy of seeing the world through the

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<sup>88</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to Robin Slow for introducing me to Anna-Marie White at the Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū and *The Maui Dynasty* exhibition.

<sup>89</sup> Other artists in *The Maui Dynasty* exhibition were John Edgar, Max Gimblett, Janet Green, Niki Hastings-McFall, Hoon Li, Simon Kaan, Virginia King, Richard Orjis, John Pule, Joe Sheehan, Young Sun Han, and John Walsh.

<sup>90</sup> Auckland Conference of University Art and Design Schools, September 1994

colours of one's own cultural perceptions" ("Seeing Twice" 18). He recognises that part of the work he has taken on to preserve a Māori visual vocabulary also means upsetting a balance of power. Infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences is the work of a trickster creating disorder with what may be unfamiliar to the dominant culture.

Human beings are more complicated than mythological characters, so rather than asserting that artists are tricksters, Hyde points out instead, moments when the practice of art and the trickster myth coincide so that they might illuminate each other. Hyde recalls Pablo Picasso:

When Pablo Picasso says that "art is a lie that tells the truth," we are closer to the old trickster spirit. Picasso was out to reshape and revive the world he had been born into. He took this world seriously; then he disrupted it; then he gave it a new form. (13)

When tricky politicians lie and steal, they are not opening roads to new possibilities. As Hyde points out "the deceitful politician is a crook, not a culture hero" (13). The artist, on the other hand, comes closer.

A work of art can play the role of the trickster just as easily as an artist can embody the trickster spirit. The artwork functions as cultural criticism and as a piece to stimulate dialogue. It provokes, is unsettling, has an ironic tone, creates paradoxical or contradictory emotions in an audience or members of the same audience, so no single critical response is ever adequate to it. The artwork-as-trickster engages a viewer into a conversation that places the viewer between art and life and between a work of art and what it represents. By placing the viewer in a liminal space, the artwork is a formidable trickster. Many of the artworks discussed in this thesis provide this sort of cultural criticism.

Another characteristic of the trickster spirit is its tendency to be "less obedient to 'the parents,' less likely to be drawn into their tasks" (Hyde 90). As artists, Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena participated in the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale (2007) Collateral Events section, which allowed them to completely avoid boundaries often (necessarily) put in place by

government agencies such as Creative New Zealand.<sup>91</sup> *Aniwaniwa* (Figure 15) was chosen by the Biennale's curator Robert Storr, and was well received at one of the most prestigious art events in the world. To experience the multi-media sculptural installation, the viewer is invited to lie on cushions on the floor. *Aniwaniwa* is a collection of hanging sculptures with internal projections and sound components. The rounded sculptural forms are wakahuia or vessels containing highly prized things. The video projections feature people trying to go about their daily tasks, like lighting fires, but underwater. Having the sculptures hang above



**Figure 15**  
**Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena**  
***Aniwaniwa***  
**2007**  
**Multi-media installation**  
**Image provided by Brett Graham.**

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<sup>91</sup> Because Creative New Zealand did not send an official New Zealand presentation to the Venice Biennale in 2007, Brett and Rachel did not necessarily subvert the Arts Council of New Zealand. However, Brett's story about going to Venice as a self-initiated project is about a mindset of not feeling dependent on Creative New Zealand and about creating an example of how artists can participate in significant exhibitions with less interference.

the viewer was intended to disorient the viewer's perceptions. The piece specifically refers to Horahora in Waikato, Fred Graham's childhood hometown, which was flooded out of existence with the creation of a hydroelectric power station. The larger underwater theme investigates forced migration of Oceanic peoples, using flooding and submersion as metaphors for cultural loss. With climate change raising the sea level, this exploration into drowning communities is salient in Oceania as well as in Venice, a slowly sinking city.

*Going [to Venice] independently set a precedent for other artists. There is a pathway for Māori art to operate without going through Creative New Zealand. I did enjoy going that route and opening doors for other artists, so we don't have that dependency mentality. You can actually initiate things yourself, if you believe strongly enough in them. The whole thing could have fallen over completely and we could have looked stupid, but we overcame all of those risks in the end. Overcoming difficulties and overcoming boundaries were part of the ingredients that made something exciting. It was probably the most adventurous thing that I've ever done. But it paid off.*

*I most enjoyed dealing directly with the Italians. That's how it should be – Māoridom dealing directly with the Italians. Māori culture and New Zealand culture are actually two different animals. And because we went independently, we didn't have to operate in the same sort of trade fair as the artists in the national pavilion. I liked being there in that capacity, rather than representing cheddar cheese and the Goodnight Kiwi and all that stuff that is New Zealand.*

*If I am proud of one aspect of Aniwanīwa, the collaboration with Rachel [Rakena], it was that, for me, it answered what art should be doing on a lot of levels. I believe it held its own at the world location of the Venice Biennale and at the same time, people from Pohara and Maungatautari had a real affinity with it. Most contemporary art isolates general audiences, but I could see how those people [of Pohara and Maungatautari] have*

*taken it on board as representing an aspect of their story and their views, what they've had to deal with to express their identity. Aniwanawa can be used as a strong example of art actually being able to operate on both levels. As well as on the level of having a direct relationship with the Italians without having to go through our great white fathers in Wellington.*

## BRETT'S STORIES

I think of home as Pohara and Maungatautari, which is where my father grew up. My brother and sister don't feel particularly close to the place, but I've always gone back. And in being conscious of going back there, I've cultivated quite a strong relationship with the people there. They've been wonderful to me, which gives me a sense of really being home.

It's ironic because the exact place my father grew up, Horahora, is under water, so the people were, in a sense, rendered landless. My mother's family were farmers, so as children we had a real affinity for the land in the north. But the sad reality is that none of their kids wanted to go farming, so all of that land has left the family and that connection has been severed.

Horahora was a village that was set up as a power station, to service the first power station on the Waikato River. My father has very fond memories of growing up there, but they're always sort of tinged with a sadness because the village ceased to be. There's a termination point where that village has ended. Unlike most people who can point to a town and go, "I grew up there," it's changed. This town remains sort of frozen underwater. In fact a lot of the buildings and power stations were more or less left intact as they were in 1947, and that's my fascination with the place.

The exhibition *Aniwaniwa* talks very much about that history and uses the metaphor of drowning, of being submerged under water, for cultural loss. In the Māori worldview, all of the things that are echoed in the world and the heavens above, have their equivalent underneath the water. So from the greatest peaks of the greatest heaven, there's actually the equivalent under water. And that's where a lot of the mythology is based. It refers to Hawaiki not necessarily as being an island but as actually existing in this place under the water, so in a lot of the origin stories the people are actually fish people living underwater.

There are two main myths, the legend about Tinirau and the legend about Ruatēpupuke descending under the waters to retrieve the art of carving, hence my fascination with going back, being able to dive under the water to rediscover that history of Horahora. Grandad used to talk about these stories all the time, and, you know, as kids it used to go in one ear and out the other. All my cousins can concur with that. But, as you get older you realise the real significance of them and how much that has influenced your way of thinking.

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It's not like I sit around thinking, "Man, I'm so creative." I think creative people know they're creative because of experiences they have with people who are practical from an early age. When they pick up the hammer the wrong way, or they do things in a certain unique way, then their relatives who are practical turn around and look at them like they're on another planet. The only excuse is they're creative. Maybe it's just another word for uncoordinated or awkward. My mother's family were always practical hard-working farmers, straight down the line. Whenever we were up there I was immensely aware that I was something else. We're often defined by what we're not, and when you realise you're not a certain way, you come to the conclusion you're the other way. All of those things that we used to hate about ourselves, I suppose you end up celebrating because that's part of that creative thing.



## Chapter White

“Creativity is an attitude.”

-- Robin White

### STORIES OF ROBIN

From a young age Robin White has thought of herself as being “different”:

*One day after primary school, I can remember going home to my mum and asking her if I was mad, if there was something wrong with me, because I figured that I was a bit different. I've always felt a little distant, but I don't mind that position because, as you stand back a little bit, you can see things. I'm very comfortable with being at a distance.*

Robin says that being different was, in a sense, thrust upon her. She was seen as an only child with elderly parents. She was actually the youngest of seven children, but her siblings had all left home for work and/or marriage while Robin was still in school. Having parents who were noticeably older than those of her classmates set Robin apart. Also, Robin's father, Albert Tikitu White, was part Māori, and her parents had become Bahá'ís when Robin was two years old. The family was not part of the white middle class society of Epsom, Auckland. They socialised with people from different cultures.

*My father made friends with the Chinese green grocer, so he used to come around to our house and he'd bring his telescope with him. He set it up on the back lawn and I'd look at the moon and Saturn and things like that. And we had Sāmoan friends who used to come to our house, and sometimes we'd go to visit them in Ponsonby. When we went to their gatherings, we'd eat this neat food. My father was very fond of taro. He grew taro, and he grew kūmara<sup>92</sup> as well. So everything about us – the food that we ate, the friends*

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<sup>92</sup> Kūmara in the Māori language refers to sweet potato and has been adopted into common usage in New Zealand English, though usually without the macron.

*that we had – was very different from other people living in Epsom, Lewin Rd, Epsom. We had sort of a global outlook, which I think in Epsom in the 1950s was not all that usual.*

Every night after school Robin had to look after her father's kūmara patch, lifting up row after row of shoots and trimming them. She says she would have rather been out playing, but it taught her that one can survive hard work. The work ethic cultivated in that garden has been a constant throughout her life. The garden also nurtured Robin's imagination. As a young girl, Robin believed there were fairies living at the bottom of the garden. She made homes for the fairies out of moss, leaves, twigs, and whatever interesting things she could find in the more unnoticed parts of the garden. She always loved making things. She discovered bits and pieces of a Meccano set in the basement of their house. Having only a few pieces was frustrating. Robin longed for a full set but never received one.

By the time Robin was thirteen she was already trying out the idea of being a practising artist. The Hocken Library Collection holds Robin's earliest (1959) collectable drawing, *The Coromandel Ranges from the Back Steps at Uncle Harold's House*. But she did not consider it a career option until her art teacher at Epsom Girls' Grammar encouraged her to go to art school. During her first year at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland she decided to be a painter.

*Actually, I was very aware of the moment I decided I was going to be a painter. It was physically a moment in time and space. I was on the steep driveway going down from Symonds Street leading to the Elam School of Art. It was getting towards the end of my first year, so I'd had an experience of all the different things that were available to explore. Elam, as they did then, arranged your first year so that you had an experience of design, graphics, sculpture, painting, drawing, and photography. I remember standing in the driveway, looking up at the windows of the painting department, and deciding, "That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be a painter. That's my life. That's it, from now on,*

*that's me." I suppose it might have been a sense of vocation, a calling. In that moment I decided that the course of my life would be channelled in that direction. And I remember being very clear in my mind about the reason. It was because painting was the most mysterious and difficult thing that I had encountered at the art school. Sculpture seemed easy. I could shape things and they worked out really easily, strangely enough. But painting seemed so mysterious. I mean, how do you decide where to put a line and what colour to choose and even what to say? It seemed so difficult to grasp. I figured it would take a lifetime to feel like you were getting close to grasping it. And after going to Europe a couple of years ago and seeing works by Duccio and Piero della Francesca, I realised I've got a hell of a lot to learn. I haven't got anywhere near grasping it. It's a slippery fish. But that's the attraction. There is so much to learn.*

Robin's love of learning may have come from her parents; neither attended secondary school but both valued classic literature and loved learning. After becoming Bahá'ís they also put into practise the Bahá'í emphasis on equality between men and women in all areas, including the curricula taught to boys and girls. Before becoming Bahá'ís, Robin's parents kept her older sisters home at school age while her older brothers were sent to boarding school. In contrast, Robin was sent to school, with sacrifices made to afford that education, and she was told to aim for the top, whatever she chose to do. Robin's parents added to her education by introducing Robin, at a young age, to people of different nationalities. Robin's mother taught her to sew, and Robin's father brought her along to meetings where she did not find other children: the left book club, peace council meetings, and public speaking meetings. Albert also educated Robin on the horrors of war based on his experiences in World War I.

*He spared me none of the details. I think it was his way of assuring me that war is horrific and that it should never be allowed to happen. It is not a way of solving problems. He was passionately anti-war. He talked in a very illustrative way about being on the*

*front line. He was assigned to a group of six on a gun pulled by mules. He described to me what it was like for the mules and horses to be hit by shells, their screaming, running, and having their legs shot off. He described what it was like for a shell to explode and kill or terribly maim the other five men in his group. He was untouched, but he had to deal with these men. He shared graphic details like having to stuff the guts back into the guy's belly and hold it together somehow to see if he could save his life while there were shells exploding around him. The extraordinary thing is that he was there on the front line and he never got hit.*

*Sometimes there were funny stories too. Gruesome and ghastly but funny at the same time. Like what it was like having diarrhea when you couldn't do anything about it because when you're in the trenches with mud up to your knees, there's no way of changing yourself. He described what it was like having lice in your trousers and having to eat rank food. He was constantly telling stories like that. I think he just wanted me to be absolutely sure that war was terrible and inhumane and that this was no way for human beings to behave. That there was no glamour whatsoever involved in war.*

*He also spoke a lot about the fact that in the First World War, your trenches and those of your enemy were very close. You could see each other. You could hear each other. He said that the priests would come and bless your guns and call upon the Lord to help you be victorious, and you knew damn well that a priest was going to do that for the Germans as well. He thought that was crazy. And he figured that there was no way that Christianity could bring about peace because they were just too disunited. Here they were fighting one another when the Bible clearly says, "Thou shalt not kill." He was brought up as a Christian, as you were in his generation. They went to church. But he came back from the First World War having lost his faith in the church. But he had not given up on an idea of*

*there being a God or some need for spiritual connections between people, but he had no idea how that might work.*

*Then my parents discovered the Bahá'í Faith. In the 1940s there was a Bahá'í, from Australia as I recall, who was travelling around New Zealand, going from town to town, putting an advertisement in the local newspapers and saying, "I'm going to give a public talk, on the question of world peace and the Bahá'í Faith."<sup>93</sup> And my father thought, "World peace? That could be worth listening to." So they went along and that led them to investigating Bahá'í teachings and then becoming Bahá'ís. That was in 1948, at a time when the Bahá'í community was very small, and it was quite an outrageous thing to do, and I think all his relatives had thought he'd gone nuts, that he was becoming a religious nutter. "Albert's got religion," is what the relatives were saying apparently.*

The influence the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith had on Robin's parents shaped Robin's life, most overtly in terms of education and the aspirations they held for her. But, as with any childhood influence, the reach of the central Bahá'í principle of establishing unity in diversity became clearer with later reflection. Robin was raised as a Bahá'í but did not formally enroll until 1971.

*If I were to define myself in terms of identity, I would have to say the core identity I have is as a Bahá'í. In terms of ethnicity I'm a mixture, so it's not something whereby I would define myself.<sup>94</sup> Your view of the world is shaped at a young age, and I think the habits that I grew up with – the habits not only of behaviour but also of thinking – are*

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<sup>93</sup> It is common for Bahá'ís to place advertisements in newspapers or hold public meetings to share their views with anyone who responds. The faith is spread mainly through personal contact. Bahá'ís have been in New Zealand since 1913. The first National Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand was elected in 1957. (Elsmore)

<sup>94</sup> In a 2004 personal interview Robin described the household in which she was brought up as one that, "in retrospect, was just naturally an amalgam of Māori values and practices and European traditions, as well." They were all there in an unselfconscious way, and in terms of ethnicity, she did not subdivide her life and decide which parts to claim or not.

*pretty much what shaped me. It's only when you're older that you realise how much it is ingrained in you.*

The devotion Robin and her husband Mike Fudakowski have for the Bahá'í Faith took them to Kiribati. Even though Robin grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand with parents who made an effort to get to know people of different nationalities, it was moving to Kiribati that really opened her up to cultures of Oceania. In 1982, when Robin, Mike, and their first son were living in Dunedin, they received a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand asking them to consider moving to Kiribati. There are no professional religionists in the Bahá'í Faith, so unlike Christian missionaries who moved through Oceania (and much of the world) with the intent of conversion, Robin and Mike were asked to assist the Bahá'í community already established in Kiribati. By the time they arrived in Kiribati, there were Bahá'í communities on all the inhabited islands of the country, with the exceptions of Tamana and Arorae. Mike and Robin supported themselves in the village of Bikenibeu on the island of Tarawa. Robin assisted the Bahá'í community in Kiribati particularly with early childhood education.

*I was quite comfortable as a New Zealand artist, and Mike had a job in television. We never thought of living anywhere else. I remember clearing the mailbox just out by the front gate that morning. When I read the letter, I thought, "Oh my gosh! Where is this place?" I tried to find it on a map, but I couldn't find it because my map was old. I didn't realise that the Gilbert Islands were Kiribati. So then I finally clicked, "Oh that must be it. But my god, they're just little dots. What is this place?"<sup>95</sup> And then I thought, "Well, we'll have to go because we've been asked, and I need to trust this body of people who've consulted and decided to ask us." The letter from the National Assembly was very*

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<sup>95</sup> Kiribati is comprised of 33 coral atolls straddling the equator. The Gilbert Islands became independent from the United Kingdom as Kiribati in 1979.

*encouraging. They thought we were resilient and could make a life there and that we would have things we could offer to the Bahá'í community there, and so on. When Mike came home from work, I showed him the letter and he said, "What do you think? Are we going?" And I said yeah, and he said yeah. So that was it. Our son, who was eight years old, came with us. And that was it; off we went.*

*We arrived in this place and were given a house to live in, which was made from all local materials. It had a thatched roof and coconut mid-rib walls; it was nothing like anything that we had lived in before. We set about learning how to live there in this new culture, this new lifestyle, new language. I started learning the language. The first artwork that I produced there was really about that process. It was a marvelous decision, and I'm so grateful that we were asked. I would have never thought of doing anything like that. Fantastic!*

When Robin left New Zealand in 1982 her primary artistic expression was as a painter. Throughout the 1970s she was well known for her oil paintings and screenprints depicting New Zealand landscapes, which sometimes included portraits of people from her life. *Florence and Harbour Cone* (Figure 16), for example, depicts Robin's mother Florence Miriam (Dunlop) White in front of extinct volcanic hills on the Otago Peninsula. Florence had been recently widowed and was visiting Robin in Otago. Robin's paintings from that time have been described as Regionalist in style. They recall for many art historians the flattened outlined representations of people and landscapes from the Regionalist style of New Zealand artists from the 1940s such as Rita Angus (1908-1970). As a hardworking and successful female painter Rita Angus was indeed an influence and an inspiration to Robin. As life circumstances changed, so too did Robin's choice in media.



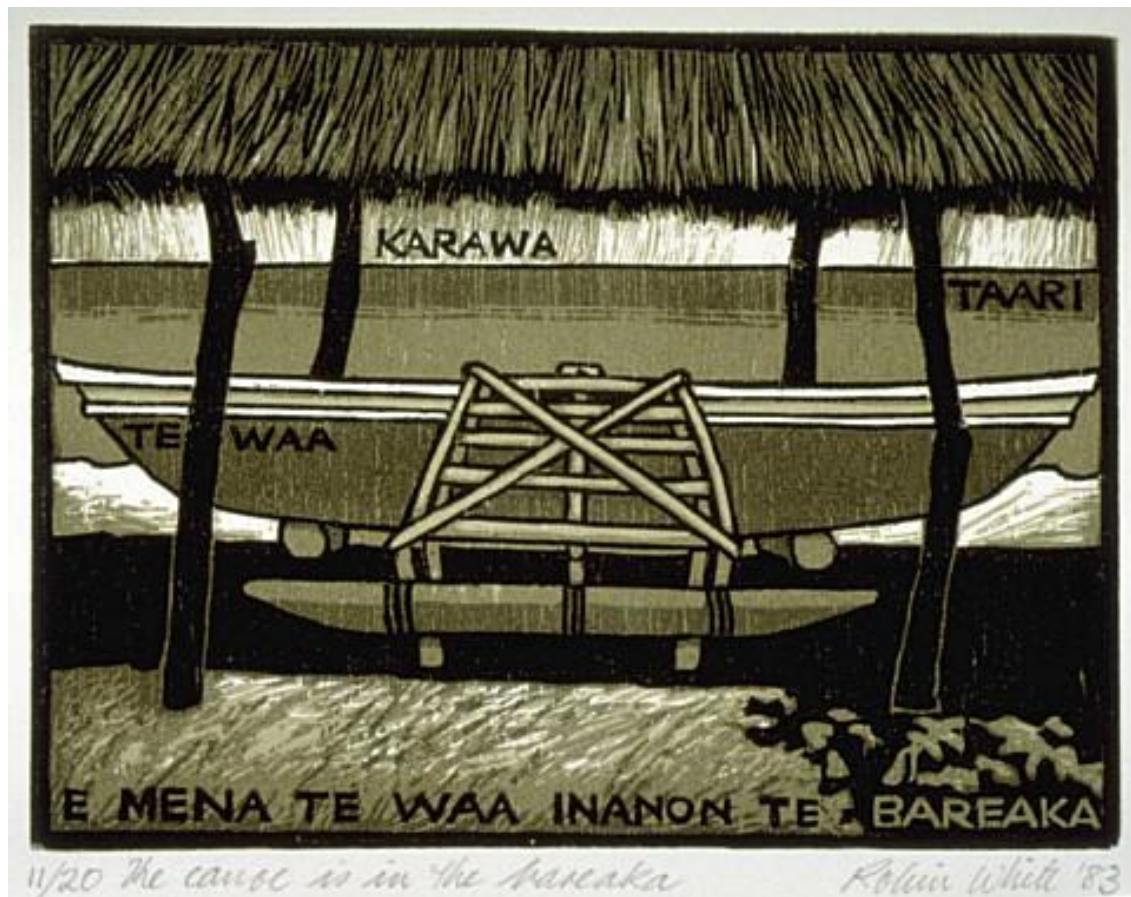
**Figure 16**  
**Robin White**  
*Florence and Harbour Cone*  
 1975  
 Silkscreen print  
 70x50 cm  
 Image reproduced with permission  
 from the artist.

In the tropical climes of Kiribati, Robin found painting supplies did not well suit the way she wanted to express herself in her new environment. From the very beginning of her career, Robin has almost always begun her work by engaging with her environment. She felt that picking up her familiar oil paints to continue creating images in the manner she had in New Zealand would be inappropriate in surroundings so different from home. She taught herself how to carve woodblocks and create prints with tools she threw in with her supplies, almost as an afterthought, just before leaving New Zealand.

The new medium also helped Robin learn a language new to her. The five prints in the series *Beginners Guide to Gilbertese* (Figure 17) adopt the picture book practice of labelling elements making the scene. In some of the prints the artist uses a technique of multiple



pressings to create gradations in tone, other prints were later hand coloured. The series of prints explores the empowerment in being able to name things, explores language as identity, and explores the artist's process of adapting to a language and culture new to her. Robin and Mike were in Kiribati to stay, and to learn, and to become integrated into the community.



**Figure 17**  
**Robin White**  
*The Canoe is in the Bareaka*  
1983  
From: *Beginners Guide to Gilbertese*  
Woodblock print  
148x198 mm  
Image provided by the artist.

In 1996 a fire destroyed Robin's home and studio. Her equipment was lost and not easily replaceable, with no art supply stores in Kiribati at that time. So, Robin decided to continue creating work using local materials. Weaving pandanus is a well-developed art in Kiribati. Robin had no experience weaving, so she collaborated with local weavers at the

Itoiningaina Catholic Women's Training Centre in Tarawa to produce a series of woven mats entitled *New Angel* (1998).

Since that time Robin has often worked collaboratively. Robin turns to collaboration when an idea is taking shape and she recognises that she does not have all the skills necessary to fully realise the possibilities of what could be said. Recognising collaborative possibilities is a matter of seeing opportunity. Robin seizes those opportunities to serve a vision, not for the sake of collaborating. When the process reveals the need for collaboration, Robin opens up dialogue to find someone with the skills. Friends and family members are often the links connecting Robin to people of diverse skills. The process of engaging collaborators can be seen as a process of reaching out and bringing together.

One example of a collaborator bringing specific skills to Robin's vision can be seen in *Waoriki* (figure 18), one in a series of four piupiu<sup>96</sup> made in honour of a fatally abused child, Hinewaoriki Karaitiana-Matiaha, who was known as Lillybing. Robin had ideas and designs but was not trained in the skills needed to make piupiu. A friend of Robin's daughter thought Holly Jackson might be able to help. Jackson had recently earned a diploma in Māori Art and Design. She knew how to make piupiu and had skills in Māori tāniko weaving and working with flax. She was also keen to extend the boundaries usually placed on those traditional skills. The series of piupiu Holly and Robin created together was part of the 2009 exhibition *Sorry*, which explored issues of child abuse, specifically the children in the Wairarapa who died at the hands of adult family members who shared the role of caregiver.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Piupiu refers to a ceremonial Māori garment usually described as a skirt made from flax.

<sup>97</sup> *Sorry*, 30 September – 24 October, 2009 at Peter McLeavey Gallery. The exhibition also featured a collaboration between Robin White and Robyn McFarlane. McFarlane, a foley artist who learnt embroidery skills from her mother, embroidered a landscape designed by Robin. *For the Child Gone So Far* depicts Lake Onoke, where the body of six-year old Coral Burrows was found among toetoe bushes (New Zealand sedges).

Two of the four piupiu in the series are made with (harakeke) flax; the other two are made from paper (red or white) on which Lillybing's story has been printed. Plastic hospital tubes are used in combination with the red paper to create a pattern similar to what one might see on a hospital heart monitor. The other three piupiu feature a central motif based on the pattern on a moth's wings (see Figure 18). The moth pattern is a reference to Lillybing's given name, Hinewaoriki. Waoriki is buttercup native to Aotearoa New Zealand. The wing pattern is taken from the moth which the waoriki plant hosts. The moth pattern also references transformation. In creating work, whether on her own or in collaboration, Robin's work often looks deeply at the human condition and moves toward restoring a sense of order and beauty in the stories she explores.



**Figure 18**  
**Robin White and Holly Jackson**  
*Waoriki*  
2008  
Harakeke (flax), silk  
46x80 cm  
Author's photograph

There have been times, as was the case with Leba Toki, when Robin has not had to look far at all to find someone with the skills needed for a collaboration. While in transit on trips between Kiribati and New Zealand or Australia, Robin admired barkcloth hanging in an airport lounge. When she asked her Fijian friend and fellow Bahá'í Leba about masi (Fijian barkcloth), Leba showed Robin pieces from the collection she had made. From there they began working on *Tea, Milk, Sugar*, a series of stenciled barkcloth that explores the concept of finding unity in diversity in Fiji. After seeing *Tea, Milk, Sugar* at the National Gallery of Australia, Maud Page invited Robin and Leba to create a work for the 6<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial (APT6). Robin and Leba invited masi maker and fellow Bahá'í Bale Jione to join them in creating *Teitei Vou (A New Garden)* (Figures 19 and 20).<sup>98</sup>

The work began in Leba's home in Lautoka, which is known as "Sugar City" because it houses the largest of Fiji's four sugar factories. The artists looked at the role of sugar both in the history of Fiji and also within a family. The sugar industry grew in Fiji with the introduction of indentured Indian labourers. The lack of rapport between the different cultures which make up the population of Fiji today is often highlighted in political reporting, but the artists see the situation as full of opportunities for creating a model of a harmonious society. For them, sugar is also a metaphor for something that can sweeten human relationships, within and beyond the family, within and beyond the community, and within and beyond the nation. Through their stencilled masi, they carried the ideas represented by sugar to Mt. Carmel in Haifa, which is a holy place for Bahá'ís. The work depicts the terraced gardens surrounding the Shrine of the Bab. Within those gardens the artists have "planted" sugar cane, taro, pineapples, and the paper mulberry bush out of which barkcloth is

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<sup>98</sup> Robin considered the APT a venue that would be more receptive to work that was overtly informed by religious faith, such as *Teitei Vou*, because when she participated in the first APT in 1993 she found (and was exhilarated at finding) contemporary work from Asia and the Pacific created from a spiritual basis.



made. The piece also includes symbols from major world religions, most of which are found in the diverse society in Fiji. “A New Garden” are words taken from the writings of Bahá’u’lláh describing an exalted paradise, a new garden, in which the mysteries of love are unraveled. Those who strive and reach that place can learn from the wisdom of its eternal fruits.



(detail)

**Figure 19**  
**Robin White, Leba Toki, Bale Jione**  
***Teitei Vou (A New Garden)*, taunamu**  
**2009**  
**Natural dyes, barkcloth**  
**9x12 feet**  
**Collection of Queensland Art Gallery**  
**Image provided by Robin White.**

The large masi is only one component of the 2009 installation created for APT6. The artists produced several pieces which draw on the idea of the elements used in a traditional Fijian wedding. Instead of looking at a marriage of two individual human beings, the work explores the idea of a marriage of cultures, specifically Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fiji Islander. The taunamu, the largest masi, provides a backdrop for the bride and groom as they stand before their family members. The artists chose to make this taunamu 12 by 8 feet to recognise historical realities of indentured Indian labourers, who were assigned to share a 12’

x 8' room. The work is rich with layers of symbolism, with the purpose of expressing positive cultural interaction. Placing these elements within this size is the artists' way of saying, "this is a place where there is room for more" because from a marriage of cultures comes an abundance of gifts and understanding.

Below the taunamu, on a plinth, sits the ibe vakabati (a woven pandanus mat with a woollen fringe border) (Figure 20). The ibe vakabati design includes the Fijian sandalwood vine, which is used as a perfume for weddings, as well as the lotus flower, which the artists understand to be a Hindu symbol of connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. Layered on top of the ibe vakabati is the butubutu (another piece of decorated masi), upon which sit two cloth mats made out of fragments of sari material (silk and cotton) and strips of masi. Leba's Indo-Fijian neighbour sews mats like these every day to supplement the family's income. The artists include the mats to honour the efforts put into that work. The two fabric mats are placed where the bride and groom would stand during the ceremony. The installation creates space where the hope for a marriage between cultures can take place within the Bahá'í framework of unity in diversity.



**Figure 20**  
**Robin White, Leba Toki, Bale Jione**  
***Teitei Vou (A New Garden)*, detail**  
**2009**  
**Natural dyes on barkcloth,**  
**woven pandanus, commercial wool,**  
**sari fabric and masi mats**  
**taunamu 390 x 240 cm,**  
**ibe vakabati 180 x 240 cm,**  
**butubutu 150 x 240 cm,**  
**woven mats 67 x 46 cm each**  
**Collection of Queensland Art Gallery**  
**Author's photograph**

## INSIDER/OUTSIDER

### Robin's Movement from Outside In

Before going to Kiribati, Robin was recognised in New Zealand as a professional artist. In Kiribati, where there were no professional artists, in terms of occupation, Robin felt like “a strange bird that had flown in from another place.” This did not stop her from immersing herself in i-Kiribati life, as there were also areas in which she felt more comfortable with life in Kiribati than in New Zealand. In Kiribati she found there was not a dichotomy between spiritual life and daily life. Asking about and discussing one's religion was perfectly normal because a person's beliefs are amongst the most interesting things about her/him. In Kiribati discussing religion was normal, but being a professional artist was strange. In New Zealand, Robin had experienced success as an artist, but she felt on the outside in terms of the more spiritual areas of her life.

After several years of living in a country with no “professional” artists, going to the first APT (in 1993) as one of the artists representing New Zealand gave Robin confirmation as an artist. Robin also found it encouraging to see work at the triennial for Asian and Pacific art created by artists approaching their work from a religious basis and making reference to spiritual themes in their work. Seeing the work of Islamic and Buddhist artists imbued with a deep spirituality opened up a spectrum of possibilities Robin did not find in contemporary work of Western artists. At the APT, Robin shifted from being “a strange bird” in either of the worlds she had known to fitting into a space of connections.

When Robin returned to the APT in 2009 she described another shift that occurred between participating in the first APT and the sixth: *In terms of the Pacific, when I was in the first APT, in a sense, I was like an outsider looking in, looking into the environment that I found myself in. But in the work upstairs [in the gallery] I feel, along with my collaborators, firmly positioned within the Pacific looking out. That, to me, would be a major difference.*

Robin's expressions as an outsider looking into the Pacific can be seen through the work exhibited at the first APT, *Beginners Guide to Gilbertese* (Figure 17). *I'd been in Kiribati for just over ten years. The work was expressing myself as a New Zealander who had left the country that I'd grown up in and started to mature in as an artist. I came from the outer side of the Pacific, arrived in the middle of it, and started looking into it. Right from the beginning, my work was really about me responding to this new place - observing it, recalling my observations, inserting my own responses to those situations. I was still very much in learning mode. I still am, but in terms of orientation, I was very much focused on that particular place where I had gone to live, looking into it and talking about it. So that orientation became a platform to talk about broader issues. Even though I had been there for ten years at that point, there was still the sense that I was looking from the outside in.*

As mentioned earlier, Robin has long been comfortable with being at a distance. However, during the seventeen years she spent in Kiribati she overcame what Pacific historian Doug Munro describes as a "culture gap." According to Munro, closing that gap includes attaining "a cross-cultural perspective so as to avoid interpreting the motivations and actions of Islanders in terms of our own cultural assumptions" (234). Robin developed a sense of belonging. After giving birth to two children in Kiribati and serving alongside the community, she felt a shared sense of responsibility for the community as one of its members. And when she returns to Kiribati, she can revisit the places where significant events in her children's lives took place. Her children grew up speaking the Kiribati language as their first language and attended the local primary school. Robin and Mike sent their children to live with an i-Kiribati family friend in Masterton, New Zealand for their secondary education. Robin and Mike later returned to New Zealand because they felt they needed to be with their children. When Robin returned to New Zealand after living in



Kiribati for seventeen years, she felt as if she had just left her home rather than feeling like she was coming home.

*As time has gone by, I've migrated more and more into the Pacific, in my head and in my heart. I'm fluent in the [Kiribati] language. I'm involved in all kinds of activities that are ongoing there. I've maintained regular contact with Kiribati. Even though I left, I'm still back there every year.<sup>99</sup> I have very close relationships with certain people there and have an ongoing interest in what's happening there.*

Robin's migration into "the Pacific" started with Kiribati and has included involvement with communities in Hawai'i, Tahiti, and Fiji. Within the Bahá'í organisation, Robin was appointed to an institution which serves the central Pacific. While serving these communities Robin has recognised native Hawaiian culture, Tahitian maohi culture, French culture, American culture, i-Kiribati culture; but there is also a Bahá'í culture which underpins all the other diversities. It was within the framework of Bahá'í culture that Robin felt situated inside the Pacific looking out, at APT6.

*The work in this year's APT was a collaborative work, so it's not just me doing the talking. It's me and my [Fijian] friends, together, saying something in which each of us is looking beyond the Pacific out. Our work is looking at a human condition, which is symbolised by what's going on in Fiji, but which we see as being replicated all over the world. Whole populations are being swept from their country of origin - by war, by economic conditions, by a multitude of situations - across continents and across oceans, arriving in large groups, in places where they are outsiders. They are different; they are new. They're not part of the core culture.*

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<sup>99</sup> Robin was in service of the Bahá'í institution, which required regular travel to parts of the Pacific. Her term of service came to an end in 2010, so she no longer returns to Kiribati every year.

*Wherever you go, there is this challenge of how we can function as a harmonious society, as a community that's integrated and coherent. A significant percentage of the population of Fiji is Indian of various origins. They were swept there by conditions way beyond their making. Their presence is a fact of life. They are not going away.<sup>100</sup> So this is the big challenge in Fiji. How do we forge a society where there is a common sense of belonging, one that is mutually recognised rather than insider/outsider?*

### **Insider/Outsider in Oceanic Studies**

The insider/outsider dichotomy has taken up a lot of space in the field of area studies of so-called Third World countries or previously colonised areas. Many scholars in the field of Oceanic studies recognise the limitations of dichotomous pairs such as insider/outsider.<sup>101</sup> Even peoples of Oceanic heritage who are scholars in the field, are “outside” many lived Oceanic realities, and, as scholars, they recognise the advantages of distance to engage critically and consider multiple perspectives. There are people who are not part of an Oceanic genealogical continuum who have lived realities amongst Oceanic peoples in such a way that they have gained at least some “insider” knowledge. Dichotomous pairs do not allow for the possibility of being at once both insider and outsider. Scholars studying Oceania cannot simply be cast as “insiders” or “outsiders.” And yet the notion that one must be one to understand one continues to be a source of discussion in many areas of Oceanic scholarship.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Indentured labourers were brought to Fiji from India by British colonial rulers between 1879 and 1919 to work on sugar cane plantations. From the early 1900s immigrants from India also freely settled in Fiji. Over the past century, the connection to the Indian subcontinent has weakened or disintegrated for a great many Indo-Fijians. Going “back” to India is not an option.

<sup>101</sup> See Munro, Tawake, and contributions to Lal, for example.

<sup>102</sup> At the 2010 Pacific Arts Association conference in Rarotonga, for example, after Michaela Appel finished presenting a paper discussing a female Aitutaki figure held by the State Museum of  
Footnote continues on next page.

Until the 1950s the Pacific was seen mostly through imperial frameworks. Most of the writing about and images of Oceania came from a Eurocentric perspective that depicted the islands as exotic and the people as primitive. In the academy it was J.W. Davidson at the Australian National University who called for a more Island-centred approach in the 1950s. In the late 1960s, early 1970s Ron Crocombe established a publishing network at the University of the South Pacific and encouraged Oceanic peoples to write their own stories.<sup>103</sup> Drawing attention to the work of “insiders” helped revise power imbalances of the past and re-image the present. But as Kirin Narayan points out, to privilege a person’s location as an “insider,” without considering the multiple components contributing to that person’s location, is to assume there is a single authentic insider’s perspective shared by all members of the group:

It might be argued that the condescending colonial connotations of a generic identity that cling to the term *native* could be lessened by using alternative words: *indigenous* or *insider*, for example. Yet the same conceptual underpinnings apply to these terms too: they all imply that an authentic insider’s perspective is possible, and that this can unproblematically represent the associated group. (678)

From the late 1970s a postcolonial framework emerged through which cultural contexts of former colonies of European empires were viewed with the assumption that place of birth or residence, nationality, or ethnicity could not be conflated into over-inclusive neo-colonial terms such as “the Third World.” Instead of privileging a central imperial understanding, a postcolonial framework supports multiple intellectual spaces where imperial assumptions are destabilised. However, this framework does not completely avoid binary distinctions, as it is a response against colonial representations, which were defined by the dichotomous pair of Self and Other. One explanation Sandra Tawake gives of postcoloniality in terms of

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Ethnology in Munich, she was asked by a Cook Islander attendee to consider returning the figure to the islands instead of trying to explain Cook Islands culture to Cook Islanders.

<sup>103</sup> For more about Ron Crocombe and the work he did at the University of the South Pacific see Crowl et. al.

literature is “a subject looking at itself as object and ridiculing the mechanism that created its object status” (163). In a sense this is what Haunani-Kay Trask has done in her response to Roger Keesing’s 1989 article discussed below, but the Keesing/Trask articles seem to strengthen the insider/outsider opposition rather than abandon it. Views may have changed or evolved in the years since this debate, however, this well-publicised conversation continues to inform, and sometimes polarise, those in Oceanic studies.<sup>104</sup>

Roger Keesing’s objective in writing “Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific” was to “promote a more genuinely radical stance in relation to both the more distant and the more recent past—and to Western domination, of minds as well as societies” (20). That “radical stance” involves recognising that the past is contested ground with multiple realities. At a time when historical scholarship on Oceania was being scrutinised through another unproductive dichotomy of authentic/inauthentic, Keesing believed that engaging a discourse that questions basic assumptions would “aspire to liberate us from pasts” (25). He recognised that there were real ancestral pasts, which were themselves highly political, and there are pastoral visions of the past, which are simplified and politicised in contemporary times; and there is a gulf between them. Keesing’s “radical” stance is to neither defend nor debunk the versions of reconstructed pasts but instead to show the contradictions in recreating pasts as political symbols. The real past was dynamic; there was no singular authentic past. But Keesing recognises the importance of an idealised vision of the past to counter the present and supports the resistance of indigenous peoples engaged in political struggles.

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<sup>104</sup> When my Masters degree cohort discussed the Keesing/Trask articles in 2004, we agreed that discourse on the insider/outsider dichotomy was out of date and unproductive yet we ended up split clearly by the indigenous/non-indigenous line in our sympathies. Even the native Hawaiian students who wrote Trask off as unstable and as causing more harm than progress for Hawaiian sovereignty movements supported her characterisation of Keesing. A group that the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa might have hoped to be the next generation of scholars in Oceanic studies was not moving past insider/outsider discourse.

The article points out that the “invention of tradition” is not unique to Oceania and in Oceania not limited to the time after the arrival of Europeans. Keesing uses examples mostly from the Solomon Islands (his area of “expertise”), but he also cites examples that he considers to be political mythmaking from other areas of Oceania, presenting the past as a simplified pre-colonial Golden Age from which violence, domination, and exploitation amongst indigenous peoples have been edited out. Keesing argues that refashioning the pre-colonial past necessarily incorporates influences of imperialist hegemony, missionary discourse, and the rhetoric of development because actual modes of life have been shaped by these agents. Keesing recognises the damage scholars cause with distortions and faulty interpretations, but he characterises the image of anthropologists profiting from other people’s cultures as “wildly inappropriate” (39, note 13). He admits that “experts” tend to essentialise and exoticise. He claims that a more radical approach would place less faith in scholarly representations of the past. He calls for scholars working in Oceania to be self-reflexive.

Terrence Wesley-Smith, of fair-skinned Irish heritage, was the editor of *The Contemporary Pacific* in 1989 when Keesing’s article was published. What I recall of the story Wesley-Smith tells of how Trask expressed her opinion to him follows:<sup>105</sup> From across a campus quad he saw Haunani-Kay Trask walking toward him, shaking her fist in the air, asking, “How could you publish that haole’s article in your journal?!”<sup>106</sup> He invited her to write a response to be published in the next volume.

In Trask’s response to Keesing, “Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle,” she characterises Keesing as a racist who is disempowering Natives. She argues that his

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<sup>105</sup> I was Wesley-Smith’s student in 2004-2005. During one of his lectures he relayed this story.

<sup>106</sup> The Hawaiian word “haole,” often translated as “foreigner,” today usually refers to a person of “white” European extraction. The word’s usage ranges from a neutral description of a person to a racist insult. Wesley-Smith was surprised to hear Trask describe Keesing as “that haole” considering his own origin.

article is an example of academic colonialism which cites only haole academics and lacks proof for the claims it makes. From Keesing's article Trask has gleaned that Keesing has low regard for indigenous knowledge and "knows nothing about Hawaiians" (164). She counters Keesing's claim that pre-colonial pasts were also politicised in their own time with the assertion that politicisation began at the moment of colonisation. She believes the main point of Keesing's article to be, "Natives 'invent' their culture in reaction to colonialism, and all in the service of grimy politics!" (159). She is offended that Keesing, a haole academic, claims that part of what we know about Oceanic pasts has been created. She contends that in Hawai'i the emergence of an argument of "invention" has been timed to thwart the viability of Hawaiian sovereignty movements.

Trask's article is a direct individual response to Keesing's, but she seems to be painting herself into a group called "Natives" and Keesing into a group called "Anthropologists" (or haole academics). As separatism and suspicion emerge so too do group-based truths. And as each group devalues the integrity of the other, they become less motivated to examine the ideas of the other. As an insider to the group of "Natives" Trask seems to have the privilege of accessing a particular kind of knowledge to the exclusion of Keesing, who as an outsider is not capable of understanding the realities of a group to which he does not ascribe. Even though Trask does not self-identify as a haole academic she seems confident in her knowledge of Keesing's intentions as she criticises him.

But the notion that one must be one to understand one is too simple. It makes the same mistake ignorant anthropologists make when asserting that essentially all natives are the same native. Within the group called "native Hawaiians" there are members with varying orientations in terms of fluency in language, fluency in culture, gender, education, age, religion, hobbies, occupations etc. They may have been born within the Hawaiian isles or, like Trask, grown up in California. As Robert Merton explains in sociological terms,

“individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives” (22). Ethnicity alone does not determine one’s intellectual perspective. The threads which weave together one’s identity are multiple, and even though one may earn ascribed membership, ethnicity may not be the thread one chooses to prioritise.

The Keesing/Trask articles ended with Keesing writing a reply to Trask in 1991. In it he points to the limitations of insider/outsider thinking: differences of class, interest, and power are more relevant than skin colour in a contemporary Oceania. He raised the point that people who share cultural origins can also be separated by a gap in class, power, and material wealth. In such cases he wonders how much of their experiences are shared. He characterises Trask as “a serious and intelligent scholar” with a blind spot regarding the past (“Reply” 169). He questions if mythicising a Golden Age truly contributes to cultural revival. Keesing defends his position as a critic of haole imperialism and as an academic in the Pacific who honours Oceanic genealogies.

Roger Keesing died without another public response from Trask.

Moving past insider/outsider discourse has made progress, in theory. But as long as prejudice and oppression are lived realities, it will be difficult to reverse the tendency for societies to become polarised. And yet there are people reaching across the gap. As Trinh T. Minh-Ha points out in her feminist critique of postcolonial writing, “The understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out to the unknown” (266). Growth in the production of knowledge needs social conditions of trust because any one of us can know directly only a tiny piece of anything. For the rest, we trust others.

## Unity in Diversity

Leba Toki describes working with Robin as “a big learning” partly because it was not until then that she saw masi being valued as art in museums and partly because working with someone from a different culture was a reach into the unknown. She imagined “Palagi ways” of eating food as distinctly different from her Fijian diet of fish, taro, and cassava. And she assumed as a Palagi, Robin would be used to sleeping on a lofty mattress. Robin later reminded Leba that she grew up eating taro and collecting kai moana<sup>107</sup> with her father and that she lived in a coconut mid-rib house for several years until it burned down. They have more in common than is on the surface of their skin. They also celebrate their individual differences. And, by planting Oceanic imagery in the garden of a literal place in Israel, the artists brought Asia and the Pacific together for their work in the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial. Robin, Leba, and Bale work within a Bahá’í framework, but recognising that we are all human beings with individual perspectives is certainly not limited to a “religious” belief.

The consideration of individual variability is significant in the advancement of all learning. In terms of the production of knowledge Merton asserts, “it is precisely the individual differences among scientists and scholars that are often central to the development of the discipline” (28). Because membership to the group defined as “Pacific Artists” is ascribed by ethnicity and not acquired by stylistic tendencies, there is actually more space to consider individual differences. However, having group membership determined by ethnicity (not that Pacific Islander is a single ethnicity) brings to life all the limitations of insider/outsider discourse. From a New Zealand perspective not all of the artists in this thesis are considered “Pacific Artists.” However, one aspect that unifies them from an international perspective is that they are all citizens of Oceania. Like Robin, Leba, and Bale, the artists examined in this thesis, are positioned within Oceania and looking out.

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<sup>107</sup> The literal translation of “kai moana” from Māori is “food [from the] sea.” In this case shellfish.



## ROBIN'S STORIES

I do a fair bit of travelling these days, so this happens a lot. Jammed in economy class, right next to someone on the plane, when I'm filling out the arrivals, I sort of cover the card as I write "artist" under "occupation." I wonder if the person next to me is going to see it and think that I'm a fraud. I mean who is an artist? Who believes that anyone can say they're an artist? But what else am I going to say? That's it. It's what I'm qualified to do by virtue of having done it for so long. No, there's no question. I'll just keep doing it as long as I can see. I've still got my marbles, more or less.

It does strike me as odd, the number of people who ask me if I'm still painting, meaning am I still producing things. I often say, "No," because actually I don't paint all that often anymore, but I know what they mean. It's almost like they are waiting for me to get over being an artist to find out what I'm *really* going to do.

I love to work. I love the process of producing work. A good example would be the six weeks I recently had in Fiji.<sup>108</sup> Those six weeks I worked every single day. I took no day off. I was getting up at five o'clock in the morning and working until eleven at night. And I remember saying to Leba and Bale, who I was working with, "I don't think I deserve to be so happy." I was just in heaven. It was great. No distractions. I just indulged myself in work. I can be selfish about my work and not wanting to stop. I think there is an element of that in artists.

In addition to my work as a professional artist, I also have a lot of other activities running parallel with that. As a Bahá'í I am actively working with individuals, institutions, and communities who are engaged in activities which are very deliberately trying to bring about change and assist people to adjust to change, in a very systematic and deliberate way.

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<sup>108</sup> This interview took place in February 2009. Robin spent six weeks in Fiji toward the end of 2008.

It's a very Kiwi thing to want to down play yourself. You don't talk about yourself or your abilities. Other people are meant to talk about them. That's fair enough and I am not praising myself, but I think I have been around long enough to realise that the things we learn about ourselves in contrast to other people are just what we are. There's no big deal, that's just what you are. Some things just come to light in relation to others. When I see other people struggling with new ideas, I suddenly realise maybe I have got something that they don't have. And so I need to help them. I am quite good at responding to possibilities. I think I'm quite courageous in that sense.

When our house and my studio burnt down I lost everything. I had a choice. I could have decided, well, that's it. I could have been very sad. There are all kinds of ways in which one could have responded. But I felt, well, this has happened and what can I learn from this? And where is the gold in this situation? Where is the meaning and the good in all of this? Not that I did it in a calculated sense, but I guess it's just sort of disciplines that you learn as a Bahá'í. You learn to cultivate a spiritual basis for life, a reliance on prayer. So when calamity does strike, you've got these mechanisms that just click in automatically.

I didn't regret at all the loss of all those physical things. I felt the most lovely sense of lightness. It was a very strange sensation. I felt like I was just surrounded by cotton balls, like I was in the clouds, floating. I had nothing to hold me down. And then I started thinking, OK I've got to work here, I don't have a studio or anything left. I've got to make stuff. What am I going to do here? I have these ideas at the back of my head. How can I express them with what's available here? Well, what's available here is pandanus, and I don't know how to do it, so I'm going to have to work with somebody else. It just went on from there. It was just a very logical, step-by-step journey along a whole new path and it has been so enriching. So, one should be grateful.

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I think that creativity is really that ability to maintain an openness to learning and a willingness to take risks and have faith in the outcome. Creativity is an attitude, it's not just about making art. It's an attitude that you can bring to bear on all sorts of decision-making. I think everybody can be and should be creative.

Creativity is a human attribute. Because we are created beings, creativity is part of our human fabric. It's inadequate for us to deny it or to pretend that we don't have it. It's just simply one of those things that we're born with but perhaps don't realise. It's innate in us and can be expressed in a multitude of ways. For many people it is about creating a warm and beautiful and very welcoming home environment. For a lot of women that's what they do and that's a fantastic thing to do for their children and for their visitors and for their neighbours. It's fantastic. That's creativity, if you're conscious of it and if it's acknowledged that that's what you're doing. But we tend not to. We tend to think that creativity is only in the domain of art. But what is art? I think it is that which satisfies our innate need for order and beauty. And creativity is seeing the orderliness in, or creating order out of, what appears to be chaotic but which is not.<sup>109</sup>

I lead a very, very kind of multi-layered life in some ways. It's like a complex pattern, and the best I can do is try and keep it woven together in a way that makes sense. Otherwise I'd just spin out of control.

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<sup>109</sup> Creating order has been a feature of Robin's work from early on. In 1976 Michael Dunn found "the clarity of Robin White's vision her most remarkable quality as an artist" (8). And in Gordon Brown's consideration of Robin's work, up to the time of writing the article in 1981, he found that the "sense of formalised or abstract orderliness so underscores her work as to be paramount to its overall visual effectiveness" (30).

## Chapter Setoga

“The more people I piss off, the better.”

--Siliga David Setoga

### STORIES OF SILIGA

As with most of us, Siliga David Setoga's stories start with (or generations before) his parents' stories. Siliga's father was the son of a minister, who became a minister and always wished that his son would also become a minister. Siliga's mother was a typist in Sāmoa who came to New Zealand for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and stayed seeking a better life. She worked through the New Zealand hospital system from kitchen staff to nurse to interpreter for the health board. Each of his parents migrated to New Zealand from Sāmoa on the S.S. Matua, which Siliga refers to as his “migratory waka.”<sup>110</sup> The shipping priority of the boats (the S.S. Matua and S.S. Tofua) was produce. They are often referred to as banana boats. However, in addition to bananas, cocoa beans, copra, and taro, they also brought people who often entered the New Zealand labour force. Of the occupations listed on Siliga's S.S. Matua T-shirt (Figure 21), I have heard Siliga refer to his father on different occasions as a factory worker or a taxi driver but always also a dream builder. The T-shirt is designed to honour the intentions his parents held in making the journey – to build a better life – while also questioning if those intentions have been met by the majority of Oceanic peoples who made that journey to New Zealand.

*I've been preached a view of this country [New Zealand] as a stepping stone to a better life, where we become more educated. It was supposed to give us the wealth that we need to support our systems at home. But I haven't seen that progression. We've been*

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<sup>110</sup> “Waka” is usually roughly glossed as “canoe” in Māori. When Māori identify themselves through genealogy they often recall links back to a founding canoe out of which their tribe emerged. For more on Māori canoe traditions see Taonui. Siliga is referring to this tradition while also finding humour in referring to a shipping vessel as his ancestral waka.

*coming to New Zealand since the 1950s. We came in as labourers and occupied that lower socio-economic sector of society. We're still in that place 60 years on. There have been successes – lawyers, judges, doctors, what have you – but too few for the population that's come over. I've always questioned whether it's our cultural system that has held us down, whether our dependence on our cultural practices doesn't take into consideration our welfare at home [in New Zealand] within our immediate home environments. I speak up against the core of our island beliefs and systems and examine how much church and culture are playing roles in keeping us down. We've given our power away to those systems. For me, progress is about seeing people move up and become more independent, being able to provide for their families. I don't want us to go out at the same level we came in.*



**Figure 21**  
**Siliga David Setoga**  
***S.S. Matua***  
 2006  
 POPO Hardwear T-shirt  
 Screenprint plastisol on  
 cotton  
 Photograph by  
 Siliga David Setoga

One could argue that Siliga's father did not go out at the same level he came in. After arriving in Auckland in 1961, Siliga's father went to Tokoroa and worked in the Kinleith Mill for about ten years. He returned to Auckland and in the 1970s at church games in Grey Lynn

met Siliga's mother. Siliga's father worked through being "a Sanitarium factory Weet-Bix-making, taxi-driving, preacher man." When he passed away in 2004 Siliga's father was a well-respected member of the community as a minister, and his two children were on their way to higher education. Siliga recognises that compared to many of his friends and relatives he had a "blessed upbringing" and his parents gave him "the best of life." However, Siliga felt stifled by having to conform to please others. He sees this conformity as a practice tied to Sāmoan culture and an obstacle to fully realising the "better life" most Sāmoans migrated to New Zealand for. By remaining attached to unchanging cultural practices, Siliga believes parents are limiting their children in what they can accomplish in New Zealand.

*One thing that's always on my mind is if we always do what our parents tell us to do, then are we who we are for ourselves or are we who we are for them? There's an element of guilt because I have to do what my parents tell me to do because they fed me, they clothed me. They brought me up. But then once they've passed on, then who am I when the figure is gone that used to tell me how to think, how to act, what I should do to be a Sāmoan boy. And once that figure's gone, I'm starting to grapple with identity at 35, rather than having gone through the stage of finding who we are at 16. At 16 you try different things – you smoke pot or go drinking with your mates. You do that for a couple of years and find out, "No, that's not me, that's not my buzz." But when you're grappling with identity later in life, it's about wondering if I pretended to be who I was to get love and affection because that's what feeds us. PIs [Pacific Islanders] tend to stay at home longer because it's where we get our love and affection, and it's what sustains us at home and gives our sense of self, but then what's the stage after that? I grew up through the church because my dad was a minister. I think I had a lot more conformity issues than the average Joe solely because I had to play that role in the church. As the minister's kid, I had to set the example for other kids. It wasn't the path I chose; it was given to me by someone*

*else. I've always challenged that. I don't disrespect my dad's views on church, but I challenge the system that, to me, enslaves its people.*

Siliga's father may have always had hopes of Siliga becoming a minister, but at an early age Siliga was bitten by the artistic bug. When he was eight years old his class at school was responsible for making medieval shields for a school play. He knew lions were part of the heraldry of the time, so he found a picture of a lion and painted it on a shield. He says he got a "buzz" from drawing that lion onto that shield, a buzz that he can still feel when he remembers that moment. Being creative always gave him that buzz. He knew he was good at drawing, but he says he did not apply himself during art class at high school. He failed art in bursary but did not let that stop him from going to art school. Whitecliffe College was a small school with an inclusive environment that was a good match for Siliga at the time he entered. At Whitecliffe, Siliga felt he could blossom into his own person, instead of trying to fulfil someone else's wishes.

Whitecliffe's emphasis on entrepreneurial business models in art also fit into Siliga's desire to not be told what to do or spend his energy pleasing others. He graduated Whitecliffe with a BFA in graphic design in 2001, and he created his business, POPO Hardware, selling T-shirts at the Otara market before Christmas 2000. POPO is the Sāmoan word for coconut and also an acronym for People Of the Pacific Ocean, which for Siliga includes the Pacific Rim. "HARD is the badge of resilience and WEAR is the package that contains the product which is who WE-AR(E)" (Popohardware).

Being an entrepreneur went against Siliga's parents' belief that people should live humbly because going into business for oneself may lead to greed.<sup>111</sup> Siliga's mother also wondered what the point of getting a Bachelors degree was, if Siliga was just going to sell T-shirts at the market. But Siliga saw it as a way to generate income that also kept him in touch

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<sup>111</sup> Being humble is an aspect of fa'a Sāmoa. See McGrath, also Mila-Schaaf ("Polycultural").

with what was happening on the ground. The messages on his T-shirts are comments on society; the Otara market is the perfect place for feedback, research, and stimuli for new ideas. Siliga always lets the message dictate the medium, and T-shirts are the perfect vehicle for his social commentary because they engage the wearer and other viewers on levels gallery work does not usually reach.

As Siliga entered the market, T-shirt design was becoming a “virtuoso form” (Colchester 175), and POPO Hardwear has become a principal player on the scene. Siliga’s formal training in design sharpened his skills. His crisp designs are meticulously executed, creating eye-catching logos, many of which play on commercial brands in popular culture (Figure 22).



**Figure 22**  
**Siliga David Setoga**  
**T-shirt display**  
**2009**  
**Shown at Fresh Gallery**  
**Otara**  
**Photograph by Ema Tavola**

POPO Hardwear’s success helps Siliga prove that he can support his family and do what he wants to do. It gives him an opportunity to demonstrate that one need not live humbly to



maintain one's values. Siliga's success also contributes to attaining the "better life" that his parents migrated for. Since setting up POPO Hardwear, there have been times when Siliga considered throwing in the towel, but when he became a father in 2002, his family became the driving force behind his success. He realised being true to himself while providing for his family gave him a sense of purpose, and the support he gets from his wife and their children gives him strength. Quality of life for his nuclear family is more important to Siliga than sending money to Sāmoa for the funeral of someone he never met (though he does still send money to Sāmoa for funerals).

Selling T-shirts at the market also allowed Siliga to transition into gallery shows in his own time. As a graphic design major at Whitecliffe, Siliga did not participate in many gallery exhibitions. He found the art scene unwelcoming.

*I consciously did not get straight into the art game after school because I saw it was quite elitist and cliquey. I've always felt like an outsider, from primary to intermediate and high school. So I really wasn't into getting into a cliquey scene. I wanted to do my own thing for a little while. So the extent of my art practice was just prints on T-shirts. I started selling tees in 2000, and it wasn't until 2003 or 2005 that I moved my work into a gallery scene. I found it really intimidating. Selling tees at the market, I know I'm not going to please everyone. I put what I want to say onto T-shirts, and you can take it or leave it. As long as I get my point across, that's cool with me. But in an art gallery scene I felt the mind play of how my work will be received. I questioned what it would mean if I succeeded or if I sold a work. I had to draw the line and be clear about what I deemed as successful in my mind. It took quite a few shows for me not to be intimidated and just open myself up. When you put your work on the walls, it's really quite revealing. And because I was brought up in a frame of mind where acceptance by the group was paramount, my whole life was built around making sure that I didn't make waves. And that's why I was*

*against the elitist tendencies of galleries. I felt like I was repeating a part of my life where I had to prove myself in that circle. It's taken a while. When you hear people say they really like your work, it is acceptance, but knowing that my work does make waves and does ask some hard questions, that's what's quite cool. Maybe stating things from the outside is another form of acceptance, because I know a lot of people who feel that same thing. I'd rather belong to the outside rather than to an elite group of artists dictating terms. I think everyone should play by their own terms.*



**Figure 23**  
**Siliga David Setoga at the gallery opening for his first solo show *No Sense Making Cents***  
**2009**  
**Fresh Gallery Otara**  
**Photograph by Ema Tavola**

Siliga feels that he now has his dream job, where he can dictate his own terms. When Siliga was a schoolboy he did not have a specific dream job, but he knew he wanted a job that did not require a shirt and tie to keep up appearances for a company. He knew he did not want to dress up for other people. He carries that on today in his rebellion in saying that he does not want to put on church clothes or cultural clothes. He has been known to dress up in white uniform overalls and rubber boots on occasions such as gallery openings and awards ceremonies (see Figure 23). His wardrobe choice is about paying homage to the struggle toward building a better life. He wants to acknowledge what Oceanic peoples have done to establish themselves in New Zealand. He wants to elevate the working class and honour the hard work that goes on in factories. Those low-paying jobs established a foundation. Siliga's wardrobe choice is also designed to raise questions about why it is still normal to see an Oceanic man in overalls, doing what he's told.

Because Siliga's father and grandfather were both ministers, there is immense pressure for him to follow that path. On his deathbed his father requested, "Do this for me, give it a shot." Siliga takes that on board and says he can go through theological college, but after graduating, he would not be able to bring himself to be part of a system that he does not believe in. He is secure in his relationship with his God, but he believes that his congregational Christian church is more of a hindrance than a place to get help.

*There's a tendency for the minority in our church structures to dictate how much each family in the congregation should give. If we need to fundraise for church or if we need to raise a large sum of money in a small amount of time, the hierarchy in the church will say, "OK we need to raise \$50,000 so each family needs to come up with a thousand dollars by the end of the month." That can be a huge amount of pressure on a small family, but of course they don't want to be ostracised in their cultural setting. So they need to figure out where they are going to get the money from. They line up in the Instant Finance cues.*

*Most Pacific Islanders are not homeowners, so we can't exactly go back to our banks. And if we did, the banks wouldn't give us money for that anyway. So Pacific Islanders fall into a cycle of going to finance companies if ever they need money in a short amount of time. And if you can't pay off the loan shark with 35% interest, they end up taking your car or any other possessions you have. We make the donations for show and yet it's killing us inside. It's killing our kids. We're stressing ourselves out, and wider social implications are there. That's what I mean when I say our culture is keeping us down. The church puts us under this pressure that we can't break out of.*

For his solo show in 2009 *No Sense Making Cents*, Siliga created a series of six lightboxes as an anti-celebration of what he sees keeping people down, illuminating the dark side. The first lightbox in the series, *Playing Happy Fatties* (Figure 24), depicts a family (Siliga's family) dressed up, sitting around the dinner table, enjoying a meal from Kentucky Fried Chicken. It is intended to be reminiscent of a time in the past when having KFC was a treat on special occasions. It was not within everybody's price range, but it was a celebration and about happy times. Today it is an everyday meal that is high in salt and fat, yet still attached to the idea of something special. In *Playing Happy Fatties*, Siliga is scrutinising the idea of being happy for a moment at the detriment of future health. In general, it is comment on what Siliga sees as shortsightedness in many acts of Sāmoan culture today. The acts of trying to make other people happy – parents, the pastor, relatives in Sāmoa – comes at the expense of fulfilling one's own potential.

Siliga sees lost potential all around him. The second lightbox, *Away in the Manger*, shows a homeless person's space on Queen Street in Auckland. The small mattress in the alcove next to closed doors triggered in Siliga the idea of being shut out of the dream of coming to New Zealand. Siliga and his family were at the St. James Theatre to celebrate his sister's graduation, but the makeshift living space they saw as they walked by was a reminder



**Figure 24**  
**Siliga David Setoga**  
*Playing Happy Fatties*  
 2009  
 Lightbox  
 Shown at Fresh Gallery Otara  
 Author's photograph

that for many people the dream of a better life in New Zealand had not been realised. He also noticed the number 3:16 in the scene, which references the bible passage “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” This also reminded Siliga of the power the church carries in Sāmoan culture. The things the church asks its members to do in the name of Jesus, as the only way to get to Heaven, for Siliga, bastardises the name of the Saviour instead of worshipping or praising Him. God gave his only Son to the world so that all humans could be viewed the same in the eyes of God. With this lightbox Siliga is also raising questions as to why the church does not help everyone. Siliga has seen church leaders who are pleased by being served by their congregations rather than taking on the duty of serving humanity or even their own followers.

Another lightbox is taken from a billboard of a finance company. The billboard reads, “Call me Peter, and I can help you today.” *The Cock Will Crow Three Times Before You*

*Deny Me*, Peter speaks to how readily finance companies lend money. Siliga sees borrowing from finance companies to make church donations and to send money back “home” as a major factor keeping Oceanic peoples in a lower socio-economic bracket in New Zealand. Finance companies make it easy to get money and leave the borrower with only debt, which shatters the dream of living a better life.

The last lightbox in the series, *Insert Twenty Cents to Continue the Game: Five, Four, Three, Two, One, Game Over* (visible in Figure 25) contemplates the end of life. It’s a photo of a cemetery wreath, which is meant to celebrate a person’s life, but Siliga questions the value of life if it was lived to simply do as one was told. Being a good serving son or a good serving father, daughter, mother, is valued in the culture, but Siliga questions whether “we as a people really do think for ourselves.” When contemplating the end of life, Siliga also considers what he wants his legacy to be.



**Figure 25**  
**Siliga David Setoga**  
**2009**  
**Lightboxes**  
**Shown at Fresh Gallery Otara**  
**Photograph by Ema Tavola, cropped by author**

*I want to leave behind the idea that questioning is good. We're always being told what to do. I've strongly tried to stand up against that and bring my kids through to questioning everything. When we're told what to do and we do it to please other people, it fulfils us in no way at all. A lot of good does come from questioning, and only through that we will ever grow.*

Siliga David Setoga wants to engage people, get them thinking and talking and claiming their own identities. He wants to be the guy who speaks up because he knows there are others who cannot. He wants to create questions without giving answers because each person has his or her own angle, and as people talk, a collective answer may emerge. Siliga's commitment to inquiring rather than inflicting also comes through in the subtlety of his artwork. Even though anger triggers Siliga's passion to speak out, that anger is not aggressively present in the work, making his work approachable. Hitting the viewer over the head with a message is not Siliga's style. He likes it when the viewer has to participate to take something away from the piece. Siliga works with words and images that can be read on multiple levels, and he likes when all the layers of meaning do not register right away. When things hit people later, they can have more impact because the message will have come from the viewer's own thought processes. Siliga wants to plant the seed of critical thought. He wants to be remembered as a guy who stood up to bullies.

## FA'A SĀMOA

Fa'a Sāmoa is usually glossed as “the Sāmoan way” or “Sāmoan cultural way of life.” “The Sāmoan Way” implies an unchanging singularity. Culture is not an inanimate rock that can be passed from generation to generation, especially as people move from place to place. Siliga has seen fa'a Sāmoa change in Sāmoa and wants space for New Zealand Sāmoan culture to change with time and place, and for people to investigate what culture means to them.

*My dad would have grown up in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s in Sāmoa. So he had a time-locked version of fa'a Sāmoa that he brought over here [New Zealand] in a time capsule in 1961, and we were raised with that. We were brought up with this picture of how great and beautiful fa'a Sāmoa is. It's all about helping each other. And yet as time passed, what was happening in Sāmoa moved well beyond the beautiful picture that he painted about the beautiful fale, about what fa'a Sāmoa meant for him. We'd go back [to Sāmoa] and we wouldn't see it. I was trying to look for the dream my dad had instilled in us. It's not there anymore. All I see is greed and corruption. It's all about competition now, rich getting richer, poor getting poorer, ruling class Sāmoans interested in their own gain. So when it comes to seeing fa'a Sāmoa in practice, I can't find the version of the fa'a Sāmoa that me and my sister were fed. For a time, I thought we had been cheated. We had been taught the wrong stuff. Were we handed down an edited version of fa'a Sāmoa? Was it a version that cut out the crap and gave us the good bits? And am I going to do the same for my kids? Because I would have liked our parents to give it to us straight. There was a lot of ugliness that was edited out. In a way, I've questioned my culture because the reality I see doesn't match the picture I was brought up with. In a way it breaks my heart to say that because I wish I could have seen that, but maybe that was just my dad's version.*



Even though each person may hold his or her own version of fa‘a Sāmoa, just as Siliga’s father may have, the elements that constitute fa‘a Sāmoa are usually understood by most Sāmoans without detailed explanation. Siliga explained to me that everything is based around the vā fa‘a Sāmoa meaning that everything is due to relationships you have in Sāmoa, but the concept of vā is discussed in New Zealand in a way that is not needed in Sāmoa.

*We label it here in New Zealand, we try and make sense of it, we try to explain it because it’s foreign to us. [My friend] asked his cousins [who live in Sāmoa] about the vā, they’re like what vā? The vā that they live, breathe, eat, sleep every day; they can’t explain it because it’s not foreign to them. It’s who they are as a being. The vā is what controls their lives. And to be Sāmoan you have to keep that at the forefront of your mind. What we have here [in New Zealand], is the ability to turn on and off the vā valve. That sense of home [Sāmoa] is when my vā valve is on, and when it’s off I’m a Kiwi again. We’ve got a luxury of having a valve that activates our Sāmoan-ness.*

Walking in two worlds is part of what brings about a disposition toward investigating one’s own customs because as Fowers and Richardson point out, “we cannot but reflect on our own practices and ideals as they are contrasted with those of the other culture” (620). Melanie Anae, who lives and works in New Zealand, has articulated some manifestations of fa‘a Sāmoa when that “Sāmoan-ness” valve is on. The following passage lists some of them:<sup>112</sup>

I found expression in obligation to family and ‘aiga, in *tautua* (service) and *fa’aaloalo* (respect), in taking care of grandparents and aunties, uncles and younger children, in discipline and respecting elders, in going to Sunday School and church religiously and committing ourselves to church activities, in accommodating visiting ‘aiga often playing musical beds (be it on the floor or whatever else), in endless cooking and cups of tea, and in the many *fa’alavelave*. (90)

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<sup>112</sup> ‘Aiga is usually roughly glossed as “family,” “kin,” “extended family.” Fa’alavelave refers to family events that require participation by all members.

Karlo Mila-Schaaf has found that New Zealand-born Oceanic peoples (not just Sāmoans) have had similar experiences in grappling with the rhetoric of difference while negotiating identity and acceptance. She found that “lack of Pasifika cultural capital, the regulation of authenticated ways of performing Pasifika identities and the penalties for operating outside these limits emerge as commonly shared second-generation stories” (“Polycultural” 238). While this thesis has privileged commonalities amongst Oceanic cultures, this section focuses more narrowly on fa‘a Sāmoa.<sup>113</sup>

### **‘Aiga in fa‘a Sāmoa**

Family is perhaps the most important aspect of fa‘a Sāmoa. Early childhood cultural cues are usually first learned from family members. But because most family hierarchies are gerontocracies, children are expected to embody humility, service, and respect. When the children do not behave as expected, disciplinary action is delivered swiftly. Outside of the home, at school for example, the focus is often child-centred and merit-based. Learning to play different roles in different cultural contexts (something Siliga calls “performance art”) can be a constant source of frustration.

*I’ve had to conform to my environment to the point that it’s automatic now. I can change my code of conduct in a flash depending on the circle I’m in. I don’t want to conform anymore. I want to find what’s true for me. I realise I’ve lost so much of myself playing my part for other people to the Nth degree. I’m at a point where I want to claim it back, and it’s that claiming that gives me power to say I’m not going to stand for this anymore. It’s a sense of anger that gives me that passion.*

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<sup>113</sup> For a broader view see Mila-Schaaf’s thorough literature review on second generation constructions of Pasifika identities in her 2010 PhD thesis “Polycultural Capital and the Pasifika Second Generation: Negotiating Identities in Diasporic Spaces.”

*I started to question things after I got married because the reality of life kicks in when you've got to have enough to feed the kids and pay the bills. When I was single, if my mum said, "Jump," I said, "How high?" because home was where I got my sustenance. But when I had to stand up for myself and my own family, that's when I started to stand up and say, "Hang on, what are we doing here?"*

Siliga's sense of family may have changed. He still respects and protects his mother, but providing for the family that he created became more important than sending money to extended family in Sāmoa, which he still does. In discussions on New Zealand-born Sāmoans feeling "caught between cultures" (see Tiatia), family cohesion is described as being in conflict with personal freedom. Siliga feels strongly about "protecting his patch," but instead of the 'aiga including the whole village, Siliga has taken a more sustainable route which places value on his immediate family.

Another source of tension regarding the 'aiga in fa'a Sāmoa is the way those "back home" view New Zealand-born Sāmoans. Siliga has felt at times as if his application to be Sāmoan had been turned down. Siliga never spent more than six weeks at a time in Sāmoa; some relatives view New Zealand-born Sāmoans as not "real" Sāmoans. Siliga's relatives sometimes treat him like a guest. Instead of trying to gain full acceptance (which may never be given) by conforming at the expense of his own values, Siliga decided that his version of fa'a Sāmoa is just as valid as anyone else's. When he went back for a funeral, he saw a lot of greed, which did not align with his idea of fa'a Sāmoa.

*I think a lot of New Zealand-born Sāmoans grapple with the idea of not being Sāmoan enough. When we go back home we're reminded we're not of the land, not of the people. The elders in the village say, "You're not Sāmoan. You were not born here. You don't speak the language, and if you do it's broken. Your umbilical cord is not buried here. You don't have any link to the land except through your parents, and it's a displaced view."*

*This happened to me, but when I look back on it now, I think, “Shit, why do I give my power to these people to tell me whether or not I’m Sāmoan enough?” That should be up to me. I should be at a point where I’m secure enough to say, “This is me. This is my version of Sāmoa. And if you don’t like it, fuck it. That’s your problem.” But as New Zealand-born kids we do try to live up to someone else’s mark of what fa’a Sāmoa is. We try to perform the role from that other place, and yet we have no idea what it was like. And then when we don’t measure up, a lot of us just give up. Then it’s no longer about trying to be Sāmoan; it’s fuck Sāmoa. After all if it’s not something that’s embedded in your psyche and in your soul, then is it just a performance to satisfy our parents?*

*How can Sāmoa be my home if I don’t measure up? If Sāmoa is so judgmental about having its youth measure up, then how can that be home? It’s not a safe place for me. If I don’t feel that I’m good enough to be Sāmoan, then why should Sāmoa have that status of home? Home should be where we’re safe, where we belong, where we’re accepted. So just recently I’ve started reclaiming New Zealand as my home. Maybe I’m not Sāmoan because I have a lot of disgust for my own culture and religion. Or maybe the fa’a Sāmoa that’s practised by Sāmoans is not really Sāmoan.*

### **Fa’aaloalo in fa’a Sāmoa**

Built into the hierarchical nature of ‘aiga is respect for one’s elders. In Barbara McGrath’s investigation of what constitutes fa’a Sāmoa in a Sāmoan community in Seattle, she found that respect was a highly valued aspect of fa’a Sāmoa:

Some migrants attempt to re-create the traditional social structure in hopes of maintaining the Samoan value of respect. Their approach is to keep their problems inside the group, discussing them in the traditional manner. (313)

While migrants may want to recreate Sāmoan social structures of gerontocracy, their children who grow up in a society that values open communication and transparency, often find it

difficult to agree with the reasoning of the rules of that structure. Tai Mulitalo has written about finding her own balance. Rather than being “caught between cultures,” working through the negotiations of difference created a space for her to stand.

My father is a respected minister and I would never question his word in public. It was in the quiet moments at home, in a non-confrontational manner, that I asked him to elaborate on his decisions. The ability to adapt and adjust my thinking in specific situations has been my survival tool. It has been a constant struggle to find the balance between the Samoan culture that teaches obedience and respect for your parents, and white culture that teaches individual rights and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, it is this very struggle that has shaped who I am today. (15)

The gerontocracy found in the home is different from the meritocracy found outside the home. When the cultures of schools and mainstream society are based on meritocracy (even if only in image), respect is conceived of as something earned. Siliga, for example, believes that to gain respect you must give respect. Showing deference based solely on a person’s age or title does not make sense to Siliga. He feels that when people in leadership positions are not serving their followers, they have not done enough to earn respect nor do they deserve to be seen as authority figures. This lack of reciprocity has agitated services at his church.

*I've got a T-shirt that says, “Dear God, If Jesus doesn't have a bank account, then where is our money going?” And when I was interviewed on Pacific Beat Street, they profiled that T-shirt. The minister brought it up in his sermon and indirectly attacked me. He didn't attack me directly and he never said that I was the creator, but he said, “If the writer of the T-shirt is an atheist, then so be it. But if he is Christian, then certainly Hell is waiting for him.” I don't understand how a God-made man, can tell another man that he is going to Hell. That's God's decision. The only difference between the minister and everyone else is that he's gone to a theological college for four years. So, I didn't really give a toss. He's entitled to his opinion, and I'm entitled to put that slogan on a shirt. But the minister misread the T-shirt. It says, “Dear God, If Jesus doesn't have a bank account, then where is our money going?” The minister went on to say, “Who is he to question God?”*

*I'm not questioning God. I'm questioning where our money is going in our churches, that are so-called, "God's churches."*

### **Church in fa'a Sāmoa**

Sāmoa's coat of arms reads "Fa'avae I Le Atua Samoa" which means "Sāmoa is founded on God." Christianity is a large part of Sāmoan culture. Churches are a large part of most Christian denominations. Churches have come to occupy a significant role in Sāmoan culture. Of the four participants negotiating identity as Sāmoans in Seattle in McGrath's study, more than one explained that "the church is where *fa'a Sāmoa* is meaningful. It is also a place (place as institution and as image) where it is preserved. Traditional rituals are enacted, proper behavior is rewarded, and Samoan values are reinforced" (329). But again, as people move away from Sāmoa, while some people, like McGrath's participants, embrace the church's role in culture, others (often the generation born away from Sāmoa) question its relevance, as well as the church's relationship to God. Adele Naseri in Tai Mulitalo's *My Own Shade of Brown*, for example, questions if paying the minister's expenses is the best way to pay tribute to God:

I don't know about other religions but in our church the minister's expenses are paid by the people. They pay for the mortgage, the phone bill and the food. On top of that, the people also give money fortnightly for the minister and his family. My parents put a lot of money towards the minister and the church. They always say, "Oh, it's part of what God wants us to do." The only time I get angry is when mum complains that we have no money to live on. There are so many things going on at church that we have to put in for, and then each family wonders why they're always running out of money. I don't think God wants us to give our money here or there. I think he just wants us to praise him. (153)

Siliga has also privately and publically questioned if the church is creating an environment that sets people up to succeed or to fail.

*When I highlight the negative things in our churches and our culture, I'm setting up a challenge for us to do better. I am told that I'm devaluing my dad's work, or I'm called a*

*hypocrite for showing the ugliness and inner goings on of our culture or accused of selling out my people. I'm not selling out. I'm just questioning why it is we do the things we do. Isn't the minister selling out when he enslaves his people? When they have a blanket donation policy where everyone needs to put in a thousand dollars, isn't that selling out? Jesus came and made everyone the same. So, if we're all the same under God, then why do we have to give \$5000 toward a deacon's funeral and much less for a kid's? If we're all one under God, isn't that the church selling out? When they say, "Be a good Christian, give all you have," while our families are crumbling, isn't that the church selling out? What is the point of building a bigger church when we should be building the temple that is our soul? God doesn't want our flash buildings or our money. It may seem like I'm a hypocrite, but I'm challenging the hypocrisy of church, challenging the hypocrisy of culture.*

### **Reshaping fa'a Sāmoa**

Siliga's 2009 piece *A Distant Memory* (Figure 26) explores the gap between image and reality. The image on the wall, created by applying light grey vinyl directly to the surface, resembles a shadow cast by a fale. In the gallery space where the structure casting the shadow might stand, lies a pile of broken concrete slabs. Siliga describes the piece as a remembrance to tradition. In a personal way, it reflects his father's wish for Siliga to be more Sāmoan and follow his footsteps into the ministry. In more general terms, the fale symbolises a simpler time in Sāmoa – it's a back-to-basics hut where families would take shelter, representing what was perceived as fa'a Sāmoa. In Siliga's experience, fa'a Sāmoa has been painted as a picture of beauty, yet in reality he found rubble. The way fa'a Sāmoa is revered today is like the shadow image that has to hold its form even though the structure casting it has fallen into ruin. The pile of debris also references the arrival of the London Missionary Society in 1830, which Siliga describes as the first tsunami to hit Sāmoa.



**Figure 26**  
**Siliga David Setoga**  
*A Distant Memory*  
 2009  
 Vinyl, concrete rubble  
 Variable dimensions  
 Shown at Fresh Gallery Otara  
 Author's photograph

The piece explores the relationship between a subject and its shadow. It is about the tension and negotiation in the space between image and reality, the space between fulfilling a father's wish and acknowledging what Siliga needs as a person in his own environment and time. One can also imagine that by standing in the rubble, looking back at the fale and forward to the future, that Siliga has created a space from which to work through the present. Siliga is not alone in examining the efficacy of fa'a Sāmoa as it has been transplanted in New Zealand. Tai Mulitalo's *My Own Shade of Brown* is comprised of personal stories of Oceanic



people negotiating through their present realities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Kose Seinafo, for example, has also found disparity between an image of the past and current practicalities:

I think fa'a Samoa is great – in Samoa. The way they look after each other is wonderful, but in practice – here in New Zealand – it doesn't really work. I'm only speaking from my experience. If anyone does follow it truly, I don't believe they're doing well financially. They won't be driving flash cars or living in the rich areas. They may be happy, but they'll be poor. When my father died there was fifty-nine thousand dollars donated in Mea Alofa. It was a huge funeral and Dad always said, "When I die, you'll be well looked after and that will be your insurance, Mum." After my mother paid the funeral bills she only had nine thousand left. I really resented that. I still do. Especially when I think of all the years that my parents looked after people from Samoa, sending money to Samoa while they had no money for themselves. I guess my father got his reward in heaven. (179)

Even though fa'a Sāmoa from Sāmoa may be difficult to identify with in the present realities of Aotearoa New Zealand, instead of discarding fa'a Sāmoa, Siliga is finding ways to make it work on his own terms. While updating cultural practices to make sense in a contemporary reality, he is also, in a sense, returning to the beautiful image of fa'a Sāmoa that his father painted years ago – a fa'a Sāmoa that is about being of service to those around him. Siliga's investigations into why customs are performed have, in a sense, brought him deeper into his Sāmoan heritage.

*My questioning comes from looking at why we do the things we do. We do what we do because we are Sāmoans, because it's the fa'a Sāmoa, and that's what's been passed down. We don't question it. I couldn't understand why the meanings of the things we do aren't passed down with the practice. When we're taught how Sāmoan people dance or present fine mats, we're not told why it's done. When I started to question why we do the things we do, the answer was, "because that's the fa'a Sāmoa and that's what we do as Sāmoans." For me, that was a cop out, and I started to wonder if any of our parents knew the meaning behind why we do the things we do. Or was the fa'a Sāmoa the answer that was given to them? I know we do the things we do because we're Sāmoans, and that's how we*

*practise our culture and keep it alive. But it's not going to be alive for very much longer if we don't know the meaning behind why we do the things we do.*

*If my son was ever to ask me, I never want to give him the answer, "It's the fa'a Sāmoa." I want to hand down the meaning, where it came from, the root, and then it's up to him. Fa'a Sāmoa in definition is about helping your neighbor and your family with what you have, but we have Sāmoan pride that says we can't take \$200 to a funeral. We have to round it off to \$1000. We've lost the essence of fa'a Sāmoa and the sense of our true self.*

*I don't want to conform to that to become a better Sāmoan or more Sāmoan because to me it's false. It's just fancy dressing. That's what our culture has become, just a fancy dress to tell everyone to look at me. We're just showing off. We haven't stayed true to its foundations. I understand that cultures change, but it needs to adapt in order to better itself, not to adapt to kill itself. I feel that Sāmoa died a suicide. It's eating itself up.*

*The success of my kids will come with them being able to communicate and express themselves in this system and succeed in this environment – when they can perform alongside Palagis and succeed in a Western white world. After all, we can't help that New Zealand is a Palagi system, so if they can perform with the best, that's my win. I want my kids to become productive individuals who know who they are and where they're from. I can give them a sense of what it means to be Sāmoan, but this environment isn't Sāmoan. And I want them to succeed in this environment.*

*I also want them to succeed in a Sāmoan environment. So we'll let them know how it works, but purely for what to look out for. I'm not going to hand down a romanticised view of the good old fa'a Sāmoa because it's gone now. We'll pass down our version of fa'a Sāmoa – it's essence, which is to help each other out. We can't live in the past.*

*Our kids will know who they are anyway. Their Sāmoan culture will always be with them regardless. It's there. My kids will know who their extended family is, their lineage. For me, it's important they know where they've come from because it gives a sense of belonging when you know exactly how you are linked to each person and village. We've buried all their placentas in Sāmoa, so they'll always have a connection to that land even though we've been brought up outside of that. Instead of discarding the placentas, we wanted to hang on to ours and take them back to the country that we're so proud of. See, I am proud of Sāmoa, for being Sāmoa. I'm just not proud of certain aspects and practices of fa'a Sāmoa. My core is still Sāmoan, but I'm not going to be Sāmoan according to someone else's version. I want my kids to be sure of their identity and never go through what I went through, grappling with identity at 35.*

## SILIGA'S STORIES

What I truly love is the reaction that I anticipate getting. When I come up with a theme for my tees, because I'm part of the culture that I'm speaking to, I know I'm going to get a certain kind of reaction. And if we're talking about church or culture then I know the reaction is going to be quite strong. The buzz I get is knowing that it's going to rub people the wrong way. But it's going to open up some questions. It's that engagement that I enjoy the most.

When we sell our tees at the stall, I get a kick out of when people stop and look. They might intend to walk past, but something will catch their eye; and then another shirt and then another shirt, and then they end up staying for ten minutes. For me that has more value than a sale. I've engaged with someone who was intending on walking past, but because something caught the corner of their eye, they've come back. The wearer can have that engagement as well. He or she can put on the T-shirt and get that kind of reaction when walking through the street. That person becomes a vehicle and the T-shirt values them. It adorns their sense of identity. When someone walks down the street wearing a Freshy T-shirt, getting reactions from other people in the street, that's what gives me my buzz. People come back and say, "Yeah, I bought that, man, and it just turned heads." And that's what is the key – turning heads.

\* \* \* \* \*

I conducted a social experiment at church, my own little protest. We have a donation that goes toward church, and it's standardised – deacons twenty dollars up, lay preachers twenty dollars up, everyone else in the congregation is ten, and the kids are five. The kids are five dollars. That's every second week. I thought, fuck, I'm not going to be told what to give. So I wrote my kids' names down and I put one dollar next to their names. These

donations are read out. Reading the names and amounts is a strategy to get people to give. People feel they've got to hit the mark because it's being read out. If you don't perform to that level they'll whoop you, emotionally whoop you. People don't hold back. Guaranteed, they'll talk about you.

They read the names and the amounts. When they got to my name, I was ten dollars, my wife was ten dollars, and my kids were a dollar each – dollar, dollar, dollar, dollar. You could just hear the congregation gasp and people saying, “Who gives that?”

Two ladies approached me after that and asked, “How can you give a dollar for donation? How can you do that? You've got to have pride.” I just took it in because it was just my social experiment. Another lady came up to me and said, “I can't believe you. How can you give just a dollar for your kids?” I just sat back and said to her, “What do you mean it's not enough? It's something. People in Africa live on a dollar. And yet we think a dollar is not enough.” I was just laughing it off, but it was actually quite serious.

My mum had me up, and said at least round it up to five. Five dollars minimum, anything under that, you're better off not giving it. And she said that. “You're better off not giving a dollar.” But if I give \$26 per child per year, that's something. But I was told it's not enough. She also said, if you don't have money for the donation, you're better off not coming. I don't understand how you can expect people to pay to go and sit in the church. I was like, “So, no donation, no salvation?” This is not on. Is this about church being for people with money?

I guarantee that everyone will remember that my kids' donation was a dollar, but I bet you they wouldn't have remembered that sermon. What is it that matters to us? Is it what we give or is it how we treat the world? And I still do it. I still rock up and give just one dollar.

The more people I piss off the better, just to get the momentum going.

\* \* \* \* \*

My parents always stressed that they came here for a better life. I once got a school holiday job laying a foundation for a house. I came home after two days and said that I liked the labouring job and maybe I would continue doing that and not study the next year. I remember the disappointment on my dad's face. He sort of had a tear in his eye. He said, "I've come too far and worked too long for you to be a labourer. That's not going to happen. You're going back to school." I think that's where my drive to see people move up, grow, progress, comes from. It's the statement that we came here for a better life. I want to contribute to that because we still haven't found it.

I think as Sāmoans we tend to do as we're told until we can tell others to do as they're told. It's a cycle. There's no critical thought. And when we do question, the answer is because that's what I was told, and that's what I'm telling you, you do as you're told. There's a certain passiveness that goes with being Sāmoan. It speaks of humility, of not standing out, of doing as you're told. It is a beautiful part of the culture, and it is also the thing that is killing it. Even though times have changed, the same system is still running. We need to suss out our systems. We've taken a system that works in Sāmoa, and directly transplanted it here. It's not working here. After all this time in this country, we still haven't climbed out of our lower socio-economic rut. The only thing we've got from coming to this country is a bigger, flashier church. Sāmoans came here for a better life. We haven't fulfilled what we've come here for. We've just become worse Sāmoans. When I see shit that's keeping us down, it just makes me angry. One good thing about anger is that it gives you passion and drive to speak up. The reason I challenge what's keeping us down is to help us fulfil the dream of finding a better life.

## Conclusion

Ioane Ioane was the first person I asked to participate in this thesis. I explained the project as I saw it in the early stages, before asking if he would consider taking part. His response was, “So it’s a conversation with no conclusions?” When I concurred, he said, “OK, then I’ll do it.” Because I have an aversion to “conclusive findings” that use specific stories as evidence to support general theories about a culture or a people, I set out to write a thesis that contributes to conversations about contemporary Oceanic art and artists without presenting my own “objective” final word – a conversation with no conclusions. However, in retrospect, it was perhaps naïve to believe a PhD thesis would pass examination without a “conclusive” conclusion.<sup>114</sup>

This art history thesis borrowed a talking story methodology from oral history because it provides a portal into lives of the artists. The interviews for this thesis gave the artists an opportunity to talk about their lives without a need to defend or justify their positions on their art. The influences upon their worldviews and inspirations have everything to do with what their work says. Those influences were more likely to come out when talking story about their lives than when necessarily promoting their work. Even though the purpose of the interviews was to get to know the participants as human beings and not to reveal innovative interpretations of their work, some “new information” regarding their artistic practices was also disclosed. Highlighting what has been added to knowledge and understanding through the research process also highlights the benefits of this methodology. The following sections

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<sup>114</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Rankin for making clear the need for a conclusion that discusses the usefulness of the methodology. I was so focused on not writing an “objective” conclusion with overarching generalisations about the artists and their stories that I could not see any other possibilities. A conclusion that focuses on the methodology still allows for the thesis to contribute to recovering agency, privileging an Oceanic method, and exercising a just method of presentation, which are the reasons I chose the methodology to begin with.

give some examples and illustrate different uses of quoting the artists who participated in the thesis.<sup>115</sup>

### **Ioane Ioane**

For more than three decades Ioane Ioane has had a solid and impactful career as an artist (or as a person with creative rituals that sell as artwork). Karen Stevenson identifies Ioane as one of the eleven core artists between 1985 and 2000 who “led the [New Zealand Pacific art] movement to national prominence and international acceptance” (24).<sup>116</sup> Because he is an important figure in contemporary Oceanic art, there is not a shortage of material written about him or his work. Many publications have also featured Ioane speaking for himself.

For example, Rangihiroa Panoho, included text from interviews with the artists participating in *Te Moemoea no Iotefa (The Dream of Joseph)*<sup>117</sup> in the publication accompanying the exhibition. Ioane’s answers to the five questions asked do give the reader a sense of who he is. However, the extent of the questions follows the intention set up by Panoho – to cover “areas considered important in assessing the development of Pacific Island art in this country [Aotearoa New Zealand]” (20). Four questions focus narrowly on his work: You use barkcloth in your painting? What qualities in your painting do you consider derived from your Samoan heritage? The scale of your work? Your work at the moment? (Panoho 34-35). The one question entering a broader field (How did you find the art school experience?) was met with a short answer: “I was green. I was going through an identity

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<sup>115</sup> In the chapters of the body of the thesis, when the artists talked about topics in their lives or work that had also been published in other sources, the other sources were not necessarily mentioned because the position of the thesis is to privilege what the artists have said here in the own words, not necessarily counter what had already been written by others.

<sup>116</sup> The other ten artists making up the core between 1985 and 2000 as identified by Stevenson are Fatu Feu‘u, Niki Hastings-McFall, Lily Laita, Iosefa Leo, Ani O’Neill, Johnny Peninsula, John Pule, Filipe Tohi, Michel Tuffery, and Jim Vivieaere. (*Frangipani* 202)

<sup>117</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 15 December 1990 – 3 March 1991.



phase (being Samoan). I'm more laid back now – no worries" (Ioane in Panoho 35). An oral historian or life history interviewer might have asked, "Can you tell me more about that?" Perhaps Ioane's "no worries" sounded final, stopping a follow-up question before one formed. Or, maybe the curator thought it was not relevant to the objective of the interview section – assessing the development of Oceanic art in New Zealand.

Scholars often incorporate what artists have said to better understand their practices. For example, in Stevenson's brief discussion on how innovation in Ioane's artistic practice contributes to her chapter on "Indigenous Abstraction" in *The Frangipani is Dead* she does use the artist's own words to speak about his practice. The quotes are taken from conversations Ioane had with Mallon and Panoho, which reflect how the artist was talking about his practice during the time period the book covers (1985-2000). However, this use of the artist's words is different from providing a textual venue for the artists to tell their stories. *The Frangipani is Dead* introduces many contemporary Oceanic artists in Aotearoa New Zealand. In a survey that covers several issues that emerged over a fifteen-year period, the discussion on Ioane is necessarily brief.

An earlier and more personal introduction to Ioane can be found in Fatu Feu'u's article "Samoan Artists in Samoa and New Zealand." In 1995, to better acquaint the *Art and Asia Pacific*-reading public with Sāmoan artists in Sāmoa and New Zealand Feu'u explains a bit about Sāmoan arts and culture and introduces several Sāmoan artists, including Ioane Ioane. The three paragraphs focusing on Ioane move from Ioane being "the first Samoan to graduate from Elam" through his solo exhibition at Tautai Gallery to being "widely collected by art institutions in both New Zealand and Australia" (64). However, instead of the usual artist's biography that lists in paragraph form the artist's credentials, Feu'u creates a multi-faceted portrait of Ioane that touches on Ioane's personal life, his interests within and outside of art and teaching art, and a description of the textures in the paintings Ioane was making at the

time (with an illustration). It is a sympathetic and thoughtful introduction to Ioane, but it is not a place where we hear the artist's voice. Also, many of the personal details have changed over the many years that have passed since the article's publication, which is why it is important to continue to capture moments in time.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, *Speaking in Colour* is one well-known publication in which artists talk story about both art and life. Ioane, for example, told personal stories about how he saw himself and society at the time (1997). Even though *Speaking in Colour* did an excellent job presenting Ioane's own words discussing many facets of his work and life – his family relationships, his influences, the media he works with, an anecdote about Ioane standing in his truth – more than a decade has passed. Some of his stories have changed or fallen away, while others have come to the fore. In reference to a music project Ioane had completed shortly before his *Speaking in Colour* interview, he makes an observation about how people change over time:

The music is made out of loops, like myself, I can only speak about myself. Life experiences are like loops, and each loop evolves into other loops, like the ukulele loop and the drum loop, the guitar loop and the water loops. But they all merge and they evolve into this one sound or composition, and that's basically me. I belong to different categories, I have different categories of knowledge in me. The person that you see now is that one composition at this very point in time – that's what I'm trying to project into my music and art. I won't be the same person next year because I will have collected more loops.” (41-42)

Ioane's participation in this thesis is an opportunity to see how his collection of loops have changed and stayed the same over time.

The stories Ioane shared in this thesis add a layer to a loop that he discussed in an interview with Sean Mallon in 2000 for Mallon's book *Samoan Art and Artists: O Mesina a Samoa* (published in 2002). That loop became a well-know sound bite associated with Ioane's practice. In Mallon's book Ioane describes the work he was doing to bring together sculpture, mixed media, sound, video, and light as “an ancient concept of dialogue between a

number of different disciplines into one space and time...trying to a [sic] create space for magic to happen” (98). Then specifically about the therapeutic nature of working on *Fale Sā*, Mallon quotes Ioane, “I was after some form of celestial affirmation that I was not fucked up, and *Fale Sa* was that for me ... a sacred space where magic occurs of itself” (98). Creating space for magic to happen has since often been associated with Ioane’s practice. For example, Karen Stevenson (mis)quotes the phrase in her observation that in Ioane’s practice he “draws from within to create a conceptual space where ‘magic may happen’” (*Frangipani* 102). And, as Melissa Chiu moves from discussing *Fale Sā*, Ioane’s contribution to the *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific* exhibition,<sup>118</sup> to his practice more generally, she finds “a traditional [Sāmoan] spirituality at the core of Ioane’s art practice, one based partly on his belief that his works ‘create a space for magic to occur’” (14). The personal stories that Ioane tells in this thesis reveal more about the quality of that space and what aligning back to magic means to Ioane. Also, a young boy’s dream about a ray gun may seem like a random anecdote, but for Ioane it is connected to a deeper wisdom that allows him to believe “that there is a greatness in things beyond our perception.” This is the realm of “new information” made available through this talking story methodology.

### **Ema Tavola**

In terms of creating a venue for Ema to tell her own stories in her own words, this thesis falls far short of what Ema has created herself – at least three blogs, numerous speaking engagements, several published essays, letters to the editor etc. However, Ema’s curatorial career is still emerging and curation is not often viewed as an artistic practice. Therefore, relatively few art historical print sources exist regarding Ema, her life, and her work. In such cases, the act of producing texts is an important contribution.

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<sup>118</sup> Asia Society Museum, New York, 18 February – 9 May, 2004

Even though Ema may be the ultimate authority on and a prolific writer about contemporary Oceanic art in her life and career, her official writings do not necessarily include early influences that have enabled her to be an ambassador for artists and artwork. For example, her essay “Urban Pacific Art and the Role of Fresh Gallery Otara” discusses the gallery’s founding principles, its primary aim of serving the community, its curatorial concerns around who an artist is and what his or her artwork could mean to Otara, the impact the exhibitions at Fresh have had on their local audiences, and the role the gallery has played as a career springboard for some contemporary Oceanic artists. But, the essay does not discuss how Ema came to manage the gallery or curate many of the exhibitions shown there. As the essay’s title would suggest, its aim is to explain the role of Fresh Gallery Otara not Ema’s role.

From Ema’s perspective, academic frameworks and art historical contexts have had little to do with the way Fresh Gallery Otara functions. The following passage explains what may come across as, and possibly is, a lack of concern for academic coverage:

Fresh Gallery Otara is not a displaced art world bubble, sustained by the validation of curators, art writers and academics who take the time to visit. Comments from the arts community over the years include disappointment that Fresh’s marketing does not reach them. The reality is that they are often not the target audience, and with a very limited budget the core audience for Fresh takes first priority every time. (“Urban Pacific Art” 58)

Because academics in the art world, who are outside Fresh Gallery Otara’s target audience, may not have been aware of its important role and contributions to contemporary Oceanic art, presenting Ema’s stories here is useful to the field of art history.

Because curation is not often viewed as an artistic practice, the choices curators make and the thoughts, processes, and practices that guide them are not discussed widely. For Ema, curating and visual arts promotion are part of a bigger picture of social development. The stories she shared in this thesis introduce the reader to life experiences that have informed Ema’s curatorial practice. And, because the informal nature of a talking story

methodology allows for more personal stories to come out, the reader also gains a sense of who Ema is. For example, the first anecdote in the section of “Ema’s Stories” not only conveys her commitment to social development and the role she believes artists can play in that process, it also reveals Ema’s sense of humour.

With talking story methodology, engaging in conversation can also clarify how the participants hear their own voices. After I asked Ema to participate in this thesis, she told me that talking with me about her work helped her position her curatorial practice as an artistic practice. This was years before she was awarded Creative New Zealand’s Contemporary Pacific Artist Award in 2012 for her curatorial practice. As Ema continues to contribute to and influence the development of contemporary Oceanic art, I believe she will also continue to document her own thoughts and stories. But part of the joy of her work is in highlighting others, so providing a separate venue like this thesis to highlight Ema’s stories also adds to what is known.

### **Brett Graham**

Brett Graham described in this thesis an interaction with Atsuo Okamoto as “one of those life-changing moments” yet studying under Atsuo Okamoto in Japan is often glossed over in his biographical timeline in a sentence similar to the following: After completing his Masters degree at the University of Hawai‘i, Brett went to Japan and studied stone sculpting with Atsuo Okamoto. It is possible that when (New Zealand) art historians view Brett as a Māori sculptor his influences from Japan do not seem relevant. It is also possible that speaking in more detail about the impact Okamoto’s philosophies made on Brett came out in a conversation with me because of my own Japanese heritage. The way one tells a story is time and context dependent. That fluid part of the talking story methodology has contributed a more nuanced understanding of an important influence that still affects Brett’s life and sculpture practice.

Over the past two decades Brett has created a substantial body of work. This thesis has, in a sense, taken quite a narrow view of Brett. Even though the thesis is interested in the person as well as the artist in all of the participants, it has highlighted specifically the ways Brett connects and moves between worlds. This perspective is not unique. For example, in “Belonging and Homelands,” Caroline Vercoe’s examination of “a more elastic dynamic of indigeneity emerging in New Zealand” (775) (one which would include non-Māori Oceanic cultures without suggesting that they are indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand), Vercoe discusses specifically the artworks through which Brett draws attention to links between his own heritage and other Oceanic cultures and places. For Vercoe, Brett is an example of where one might find “affinities in creative practice between Indigenous Maori and Polynesian migrant artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand” (773). *Taiāwhio II: Contemporary Māori Artists* also discusses Brett connecting Oceanic cultures, with much of the text in his own words, taken from his conversation with Megan Tamati-Quennell. The chapter focusing on Brett takes a broad look at Brett’s career, discussing works he created from 1996 to 2005 (the book was published in 2007). Even though the publication frames Brett as an artist “whose work begins within Māori culture” (99), Tamati-Quennell also points out that “[m]uch of his art also embraces the aesthetic of the Pacific” and recognises that Brett’s “ability to cross boundaries and move between Māori and Pacific cultures is rare for a contemporary Māori artist” (103). Because it is not common practice for Māori artists to engage with wider Oceanic concerns, the biographical approach of this thesis is particularly useful in what it adds to understanding influences that have set Brett apart. The biographical, talking story approach allows a glimpse at Brett’s idiosyncratic human experiences and adds to writings that focus narrowly on his work.

The stories Brett shared in this thesis revealed a diverse range of influences that may have helped Brett develop the skill set needed to cross boundaries and move between

worlds.<sup>119</sup> Brett has discussed some of those influences in other publications or public talks – interacting with his father’s generation of artists, his time in Hawai‘i, the impact of a message from Teresia Teaiwa, interacting directly with organisers at the Venice Biennale. However, some of the stories here, which also contribute to that skill set, are usually not mentioned in discussions about Brett and his work – specific experiences with Okamoto, Brett’s reverence for the demi-god Maui, feeling awkward on the family farm, and his childhood experience of indigenous Pacific Northwest art in Washington state. The exposure Brett had to international indigenous art and realisation of “how big the world was” as an eleven-year old boy may be frivolous childhood stories, or they may have been important experiences that have contributed to shaping his current global view. With talking story methodology, it is often on tangents where insights are found.

### **Robin White**

Robin White is a well-known and decorated artist. In 2003 she was declared a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. Her stories in her own words have been available for decades. In 1977, for example, in *Art New Zealand*, Robin wrote about how she interacts with her environment (“Art and Conservation are Synonymous”). It is a personal essay in which she discusses her feelings about the environment and the way the environment is handled, how those feelings began forming when she was a child, her spiritual principles, and how her work arises out of the situation and environment she is in. It captures her thoughts at a moment in time. On the topic of feeling connected to New Zealand at that time,

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<sup>119</sup> Brett is not moving just between Oceanic cultures (or between Māori and Pākehā, his own bi-cultural heritage) but to highlight Brett’s participation in the exhibition *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art* (17 May – 2 September, 2013, National Gallery of Canada) Anna-Marie White has positioned Brett as “a leading figure in the international indigenous art world” and charts “the pan-indigenous themes in his work” in her article “An International Indigene” (38).

she also points out “my father’s lineage goes back to the Maori and my mother’s goes back to the first settlers in the Bay of Plenty area” (40).

However, ethnicity is not the aspect of identity Robin chooses to prioritise. In this thesis Robin has said, “If I were to define myself in terms of identity, I would have to say the core identity I have is as a Bahá’í.” Several people have written about the role the Bahá’í Faith has played in Robin’s artistic practices. For example, in the publication accompanying *Island Life Robin White: Robin White in New Zealand and Kiribati*,<sup>120</sup> Linda Tyler writes that whether painting, producing screenprints, woodblock prints, lithographs, etchings, or collaborating with others to produce tapa and pandanus weavings, “[u]nderlying all these endeavours has been her belief in the Bahá’í religion where daily prayer and meditation brings [sic] spiritual refreshment to work, and work is a form of worship” (n. pag.). Also, in *This Thing in the Mirror: Self Portraits by New Zealand Artists* Claire Finlayson’s discussion on Robin’s silkscreen print *This is me at Kaitangata* points to how Robin’s Bahá’í ring represents one part of her multi-layered identity. The personal nature of self-portraiture lends itself to an examination of the personal. Finlayson also discusses the influence of Robin’s father (and helping him with the kūmara patch and hauling cockles from the beach), associates the value Robin places on peaceful conflict resolution with her devotion to the Bahá’í Faith, and discuss Robin’s life in Kiribati as it related to the two self portraits she made while she was there. Finlayson incorporates Robin’s own words from a conversation with the author as well as quoting a passage from *Twenty-Eight Days in Kiribati*. Claudia Pond Eyley and Robin White co-authored *Twenty-Eight Days in Kiribati*, which, through diary extracts and interviews, provides a look at life in Kiribati from both women’s

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<sup>120</sup> Exhibition toured by the Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, 2002.



perspectives.<sup>121</sup> By the time of Eyley's 1984 visit Robin and her family had been living there for over a year. Shortly after Eyley returned to New Zealand her interview with Robin was published in *Art New Zealand* ("Robin White in Kiribati"). Therefore, many New Zealanders would have read about Robin's time in Kiribati, in her own words, decades ago, even before the book was launched in 1987.

This thesis moves on from there and highlights Robin also talking about how her perspective of her own position regarding Oceania has changed. Others have written about Robin's other activities in Oceania, including the collaboration on *Teitei Vou (A New Garden)*, which is also discussed in this thesis (Figures 19 and 20). However, those accounts usually focus on the work as a complete activity in a moment in time. For example, in the publication accompanying the 6<sup>th</sup> *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Ruth McDougall and Maud Page each discuss *Teitei Vou (A New Garden)* including the collaborative process, the religious imagery, and the complex cultural history of Fiji. Neither discusses the movement of Robin's position between the first and the sixth APTs. Robin talked about this movement at the APT6 Symposium,<sup>122</sup> which accompanied the opening of the exhibition.<sup>123</sup> The opening of APT6 and its accompanying symposium happened to occur during the main research period for this thesis. Therefore, it was simply good timing that I was present when Robin mentioned that her difference in perspective between the her work

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<sup>121</sup> The publication also features Robin's woodblock prints from the series *Twenty-Eight Days in Kiribati* and *Beginner's Guide to Gilbertese*.

<sup>122</sup> APT6 Symposium, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 6 December 2009. Discussion Panel: "APT Past and Present" featuring artists Minam Apang, Alfredo & Isabel Aquilizan, Dadang Christanto, and Robin White. Chair: Russell Storer, Curator, Contemporary Asian Art, Queensland Art Gallery

<sup>123</sup> There is a bit of irony in Robin recognising her position within Oceania at the Asia Pacific Triennial, an event that has repeatedly been criticised for displaying significantly more work from Asia than the Pacific. For example see Susan Cochrane "Not Much ... Pacific Component of the Asia Pacific Triennale" (sic), Timothy Morrell "Asia-Pacific or Asia-Specific?", and Jenny Fraser's *other APT*. Robin also noted at the APT6 Symposium discussion that even though she felt the exhibition itself was very centred in the Pacific "when you look around the exhibition, you sort of have to go really looking for the Pacific."

shown at the first APT and the sixth – from the outside looking in to being firmly positioned within the Pacific looking out.

More than a month passed before I asked Robin about that statement she had made at the APT6 Symposium. She replied, “Chikako, I’m happy you ask about that.” The comment was part of a larger talk, and it is possible others had not taken notice or asked Robin about it. It seemed, at least in that moment, that acknowledging that journey was important to her. In Oceanic studies, despite an abundance of theories about why the insider/outsider binary is both important and not necessarily useful, it is a difficult framework to move beyond. Therefore, hearing more of Robin’s story was also important to me. Linda Tyler had pointed out in 2002 that between Robin’s ancestors in Aotearoa and the seventeen years she lived in Kiribati, “White can lay good claim to being an artist of the Pacific” (n. pag.), and Robin’s inclusion in *Oceania: Imagining the Pacific*,<sup>124</sup> a more recent (2011) exhibition which brought together works of art by Māori, Pacific, and Pākehā artists, seems to reflect Tyler’s observation. However, Robin’s reflections in her own words bring together various pieces of what is already known about her story. A biographical, talking story approach allowed for a broader view of the many influences that have enabled Robin’s journey from outside into Oceania.

### **Siliga David Setoga**

When the research period for this thesis began, Siliga was an emerging artist. His first solo exhibition *No Sense Making Cents*<sup>125</sup> took place during the main research period for this thesis. Since then major New Zealand venues such as Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

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<sup>124</sup> City Gallery Wellington, 6 August – 6 November, 2011

<sup>125</sup> Fresh Gallery Otara, 30 October – 21 November, 2009

and City Gallery Wellington have shown his (gallery) work.<sup>126</sup> Even though his work is well known by those following contemporary Oceanic art (and T-shirt aficionados), he is still considered an emerging artist. His career has not had much time to build up a body of work as a “subject” of art historical inquiry. Therefore, most of what can be known about Siliga comes through exhibition catalogues and more immediate media such as YouTube videos and the POPO Hardwear website. This thesis offers another way to get to know an artist with relatively little material engaging with the person or his work. And again, in subject areas where little information exists, producing a text is an important contribution.

I first encountered Siliga’s work at the *Samoacontemporary*<sup>127</sup> exhibition in 2008. The exhibition catalogue gives the reader background information beginning with where and when Siliga was born. It then combines the artist’s words taken from an artist’s statement and the curators’ thoughts on the work in the show.<sup>128</sup> The publication dedicates two pages to each of the seventeen artists featured in the exhibition – one page of text (along with a photograph of the artist and the artist’s name) facing a page with a photograph of the artist’s work. The entry describing Siliga ends with a paragraph about POPO Hardwear’s T-shirts and the fact that they are sold at the Otara Saturday market. This was useful information; the next time I visited Auckland I headed straight for the Otara Saturday market.

Exhibition catalogues for group shows necessarily prioritise space in the publication to catalogue the work in the show, and the essays and descriptions necessarily focus on the specific pieces in the exhibition. Therefore, exhibition publications usually do not provide more than brief background information, a description of the work, and a short passage

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<sup>126</sup> Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, *Home AKL: Artist of Pacific Heritage in Auckland*, 7 July – 22 October, 2012; City Gallery Wellington, *Urban Kainga*, 16 January – 28 March, 2010. Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand’s national museum, had purchased a collection of Siliga’s POPO Hardwear T-shirts in 2007.

<sup>127</sup> Pataka Museum, Porirua, 21 February – 8 June, 2008

<sup>128</sup> Helen Kedgley and Bob Maysmor curated *Samoacontemporary*.

quoted from an interview with the artist or an artist's statement. The artist's words often provide a way into the curator's discussion or a way to bring it together at the end. For example, Julia Waite introduces Siliga and the work he contributed to *Home AKL: Artists of Pacific Heritage in Auckland*<sup>129</sup> with a statement he made in a personal communication with the assistant curator: "I am Sāmoan by Foreign Correspondence and via Long Distance Learning" (94). It brings up Siliga's relationship with Sāmoan culture, but the statement is also witty and draws this reader in. Many of Siliga's short biographies briefly quote his impactful commentaries. For example, the artist's biography page on the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust website includes, in a passage about Siliga's work questioning expectations of the church, "We came for a better life, instead we got a bigger church" (Tautai). These short statements represent the many experiences from which the observation came. A talking story methodology and a PhD thesis allow for the length and depth of the stories of those experiences.

Many of the stories Siliga shared in this thesis are at once unique to him and also issues that many New Zealand-born Sāmoans can relate to. Sharing the thought processes that went into Siliga grappling with these issues contributes not only to understanding Siliga and his artwork, but it may even contribute to others finding a place of belonging and making changes from within their cultures. Caroline Vercoe has noticed a shift in the way Oceanic identities are being negotiated:

It is no longer necessary to automatically factor in a colonial/settler perspective to provide the ballast in terms of alterity. The message would seem to be that we can be 'other' to ourselves. As younger generations are becoming increasingly a part of mainstream society, the development of their Pacific cultural identity is being defined from within. (776)

This seems to ring true with the stories Siliga shared. The biographical, talking story approach used in this thesis is not intended to support observations of a phenomenon; instead,

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<sup>129</sup> Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 7 July – 22 October, 2012

the stories presented in this thesis allow details to emerge about the ways in which Siliga has come to define his identity from within.

## **STORIES OF THIS THESIS**

This thesis, utilising a talking story methodology, contributes significantly to the study of contemporary Oceanic art by adding artists' voices to the conversation. By considering the participating artists as people first, the method provides new insights gained from the artists' own words, thus facilitating a fuller understanding of these artists and their practices.

However, the project began selfishly out of my desire to understand how people make sense of their lives, especially in an inequitable social world. I believe creative thinking contributes to problem solving that allows social change to become possible. I was already inclined to agree with Merlin Donald and Ema Tavola that artists are often at the forefront of change.

Looking to artists to illuminate a path toward philosophical life improvement may be unconventional, but Rothenberg and Hausman have also found that looking to artists proves useful:

Artists are our most perceptive commentators on the human condition. The investigation of creativity is at the forefront of contemporary rational inquiry because it potentially sheds light on crucial areas in the specific fields of behavioural science and philosophy and, more deeply, because it concerns an issue related to man's survival: his understanding and improvement of himself and the world at a time when conventional means of understanding and betterment seem outmoded and ineffective. (5)

This thesis looks to Ioane Ioane, Ema Tavola, Brett Graham, Robin White, and Siliga David Setoga because I saw elements that spoke to the notion of transformation in their words and/or work. By "transformation" I think what I saw was a process that was investigative rather than declarative and worked toward sustaining hope in humanity in the face of human violence and suffering. With Ioane, the transformative is in creating space for magic to occur. With Ema it is in using art as a platform for social development – social development that comes out of deepening one's understanding of oneself. I see Robin's

movement from outside to inside Oceania as a metamorphosis that transcends the animosity that continues to tether the insider/outsider binary. But with Robin, I may have also recognised, as Linda Tyler points out, “Her home is within a spiritual community without geographic boundaries, and the purpose of her religion, like all others, remains to transform life for the better” (n. pag.). For me, Siliga’s transformative space is in how he dares established structures to change. Brett’s transformative space is in his ability to bridge worlds. Transformational spaces that enable people to recognise the presence of options in the face of any perceived reality may become increasingly important as the diversity in New Zealand’s population increases.<sup>130</sup>

One way artists from marginalised populations have spoken against hegemony is by re-presenting themselves and their cultures through their artwork. However, so much contemporary Oceanic art discourse discusses identity as narrowly defined by ethnicity. Some of the five artists in this thesis do assert their (ethnic) identities through their artwork, which is certainly important, but the stories they share in this thesis also speak to the pluralities of identity. The interview process allowed the participants to clarify, and even create, in the moment, who they are and who they want to be. In sharing how the artists view themselves and choose to self-identify, they shifted my own thinking about issues in contemporary Oceanic art, not limited to ethnicity in Oceania.

Ioane reminded me not to revere Art with a capital A (but in doing so I gained a greater appreciation for his work). Ema showed me how creating “brown spaces” changes how “brown art” functions. Brett is unmistakably a person of his land, Aotearoa, while also a

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<sup>130</sup> It is not in the purview of this thesis to discuss prejudiced behaviour and racist and anti-immigrant attitudes in New Zealand. However, based on personal experience and numerous anecdotes, I believe minority populations in New Zealand are often still marginalised. When minority groups become more visible there is often a perceived threat to the balance of power, creating an anti-minority attitude. Increased visibility can come through media coverage or waves of immigration, among other factors. For a review of New Zealand legislation and policies regarding Asian and Pacific Islander immigration from 1881 through 1986 see Trlin.

person of an ocean that connects many (is)lands. Robin allowed me to see how finding unity in diversity dismantles the template for insider/outsider discourse. Siliga's process of working through his cultural practices on his own terms was a reminder that questioning, more than dictating, preserves knowledge.

Transformation is about the ability to shift perceptions. In the end, it was my own mind that had most changed as a result of interacting with the five participants. They each contributed to dismantling the confines of my mind. Not one specific thing any of the artists said or produced can clearly define that transformation. Instead it was the conversational process of questioning and working through seemingly unrelated anecdotes that contributed to that shift. It was this quality – the ability to create space for my thinking to expand and change – that attracted me to work and lives of the five artists who participated in this thesis. Turning a notion on its head is trickster work, so to conclude we return to the trickster.

### **Trickster Revisited**

Trickster was introduced in Chapter Graham, but each of the artists is a trickster of sorts. According to Hyde, trickster is “the archetype who attacks all archetypes. He is the character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart” (14). So, perhaps he is the Artist who says there is no such thing as Art (Ioane Ioane). Tricksters enjoy creating a commotion as a means toward an end, so tricksters take joy in stirring things up to make change (Ema Tavola). Trickster is at once the misbehaving youngest child and one of the people chosen to curate his iwi's exhibition at the national museum (Brett Graham). As Hyde also found, “despite all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture” (8). Tricksters confound expectation: the “Palagi” woman who has been tending to kūmara and collecting kai moana since childhood (Robin White). Tricksters cannot silence themselves, nor does shame silence them: Trickster is the preacher's son and grandson who challenges the pastor (Siliga David Setoga). Being aware of trickster is what Hyde describes

as “an attitude toward life” in which, “[y]ou can be on the road at home and in the mind, attentive to the plentitude of coincidence that habit and design sometimes obscure.” Being aware of trickster “means entering a frame of mind in which the eye notices that residue all around it” (124). It was trickster who helped me see the value in the participants’ works of art and artful words.

Some of the artists had their own tricksters as well. Jung refers to the trickster as a personal shadow. The shadow in *A Distant Memory* (Figure 26) was, in a way, a trickster for Siliga – an image of a fa’a Sāmoa that did not exist in reality. Being deceived by that shadow image triggered the anger that fuels his passion for figuring things out on his own terms. When trickster enters Ioane’s life through photographs that never develop or friends who do not understand that music is insulation, he winks back at the trickster as he realigns himself.

Talking story was an appropriate format for getting these artists who sometimes inhabit trickster spaces to share their knowledge. Tricksters sometimes use language to subvert established systems, so allowing for a more organic exchange encouraged a conversational flow rather than giving the tricksters, in most of the artists, something to push against. Fortunately, the trickster in Brett still resisted the conversational flow at times. Hyde writes the following of tricksters and language:

The notion that trickster invents language appears more than once in this mythology, though with considerable variation. Sometimes he creates multiple languages to replace a single primal tongue; sometimes he invents the “inner writing” of memory or the “inner language” of self-knowledge; sometimes he invents picture writing or hieroglyphics; and sometimes, as in Plato, he is the author of language itself. A trickster from the Canadian north woods, for example, is said to have been around before human speech and, in ancient times, to have “brought words over” from the animals to human beings. A somewhat more modest claim is the most common of all: what tricksters quite regularly do is create lively talk where there has been silence, or where speech has been prohibited. Trickster speaks freshly where language has been blocked, gone dead or lost its charm. Here again Plato’s intuition – that deceit and inventive speech are linked – holds, for usually language goes dead because cultural practice has hedged it in, and some shameless double-dealer is needed to get outside the rules and set tongues wagging again. (76)



This thesis has tried to follow the pattern of its artists in creating lively talk where there has been silence (or at least underrepresentation) and set tongues wagging again.

As mentioned in Chapter Graham, Lewis Hyde describes Trickster as a “lord of in-between,” one who can move between heaven and earth, between the living and dead (6). So trickster is no stranger to *vā*. Some of the artist-participants are familiar with *vā*, not only because it is an overriding element in some Oceanic cultures, but also, being in-between worlds was a space held for them even before they were born. Elaborating on T.S. Elliot’s thoughts that culture taken with migrants develops on the new soil as something that is both alike and different from the culture of origin, Bhabha goes on to describe it as “the connective tissue between cultures – at once the impossibility of culture’s containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture’s ‘in-between,’ bafflingly both alike and different [from the parent culture]” (167). Whether being between cultures in time (the generational differences between migrants and their children) or being between cultures in more geographical or philosophical senses, each of the artists have come to acknowledge the robustness of the ethereal *vā*.

Coming from a bi-cultural background, Brett did not find it easy to feel accepted by either world, but as an adult he has come to appreciate the richness of going between Māori and Pākehā worlds. Ema had similar experiences personally, and in her professional capacities, Ema works in the space between artist and audience. Siliga explores the space between an image of fa’a Sāmoa and the reality of his life in New Zealand. Also, Siliga’s T-shirts poke fun at the space between the promises of commercial branding and the state of life on the ground, at once embracing and resisting commodification. Robin shape-shifted from “a strange bird” who flew into Kiribati to become more like *te manu* who feels at home in many Oceanic contexts. Beautiful relationships have emerged as a result of taking care of the *vā*. Ioane’s life is about taking care of the *vā* with tools he brings with him from his dreams.

Being able to access and activate knowledge acquired from moving between diverse environments has been found beneficial by researchers focusing on effects of bi- and multi-cultural experiences. Hong et al. assert, “the meeting of more than one knowledge tradition in a person can increase flexibility in cognitive and behavioural responding, and bring forth a stream of cultural innovations and creativity” (325). Leung et al. have also found the possibility of creative benefits from cultural plurality:

Multicultural experience may foster creativity by (a) providing direct access to novel ideas and concepts from other cultures, (b) creating form, (c) destabilizing routinized knowledge structures, thereby creating a psychological readiness to recruit ideas from unfamiliar sources and places, and (e) fostering synthesis of seemingly incompatible ideas from diverse cultures. (173)

The body of literature highlighting creative and cognitive benefits of bi- and multi-cultural experiences is growing. However, the existence of these frameworks alone does not explain why the five artists who comprise this thesis are able to create work and lives that dance in the space between, creating impactful cognitive responses in viewers. In the end, the ability for Ioane, Ema, Brett, Robin, and Siliga to shift paradigms and live with flair in the spaces between, comes from individual agency. Therefore, the clues we have to understanding the ways in which they cross and challenge boundaries are in the unique, personal stories that make up their lives.

### **Human-centred**

As a human being trying to figure out the ways in which I can successfully create my own reality, I approached these five artists because it is clear to me that creating their own realities is part of the work they do. The journey into this thesis began not with a research question about creative processes, but with the awe of a child standing before a magician asking, “Wow, how’d you do that?” I felt certain there was something to learn from these five artists regarding how they recognised the sound of their own authentic voices, how their worldviews

were shaped, and how creativity contributes to creating their own realities. Like a child observing a magician, part of me wanted to believe a miraculous mantra might lead to transformation. Of course, no magician's secret was revealed. As Rothenberg and Hausman have written, it is not uncommon for this type of research to lead to the inexplicable. It is worthwhile quoting them at length:

The search for knowledge about creativity is linked with magic, the demonic, and the divine, yet such knowledge is at the forefront of rational inquiry. Creativity is paradoxical and complex, and the most steadfast investigator is constantly beset with feelings of awe and a sense of mystery as he pursues his inquiry. Creativity encompasses the magical incantations and drawings of primitive man, the appearance of new forms in nature, and the evil genius of Faust. It is a human capacity but it seems to transcend human capacities. On the one hand, the investigator is lured and excited by a tantalizing paradox, and on the other, he is deterred by nagging doubts about whether he is naively trying to explore and rationalize an impenetrable aspect of human experience. To make matters more complicated, investigation is fraught with a host of concrete and theoretical problems. The empirical investigator constantly turns to creative persons for his data and he interrupts their work for lengthy interviews or myriad types of tests and experiments. The philosophical investigation of creativity raises issues about the creation of the world, free will versus determinism, and the basic nature of experience – issues that some consider fruitless and unanswerable. Yet there is a need for rational understanding of creativity that supersedes these doubts, irritations, and criticisms: creativity has direct pertinence to diverse types of disciplines and to the enhancement of humanistic goals in our technological and atomic age. (3)

This thesis contributes to understanding some aspects of how creativity can challenge the status quo by using personal experiential knowledge to disable hegemonic structures that we may have mistakenly given our power to. The act of telling a story can validate it. By adding these stories to the public dialogue, this thesis opens up space for discussions to ripple out. Talking story helps articulate and clarify ideas. It is in conversation where we find our own voices. Wrestling with what the artists' stories mean in the context of my own life has helped me listen for the clues that may lead me to my own media of transformation.

Even though it is good advice to begin with the end in mind, sometimes it is not until we reach the end that we understand how the two are connected. The biographical, talking story

approach to this thesis began with the intention of exercising a just method of presentation and recovering agency in an underrepresented population.<sup>131</sup> Because, like the writings of Epeli Hau'ofa, the participants create space for cognitive shifts to occur, the project developed into an exercise in listening for clues to understanding creativity in the ways the participating artists think and work. The talking story methodology necessarily focused on personal narratives that highlight human experiences. Even though the narratives presented in this thesis outline points in the participants' artistic careers, the talking story methodology allowed a more "human" view of the "Artists" to emerge. In the end, it was considering the "Artists" first as human beings that led to some of the stories that make up the lives of the people who made the artwork. By challenging limitations of more established ways of writing about art and artists, this thesis creates space for pluralities in how one reads art, artists, art history, and our own lives.

The study of Oceanic art is a complex and multi-disciplinary field. In a recent and ambitious survey of Oceanic art, *Art in Oceania: A New History*, the backgrounds of the seven authors include anthropology, history, ethnography, material culture, indigenous studies, architectural studies, and art history.<sup>132</sup> This thesis demonstrates the contribution oral history methodology can also add to this multi-disciplinary field. In art history the artist's opinion is often considered just one amongst many. However, in the field of contemporary Oceanic art, where artists have often felt misrepresented or that they or their work were misinterpreted, a talking story methodology, which privileges the artist's voice, is essential in moving forward our understanding of contemporary Oceanic art and artists. The work of art history lies in presenting insight into human beings, their art, and their time. This thesis plays

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<sup>131</sup> Oceanic artists are underrepresented in the field of art history, and minority voices are underrepresented in general.

<sup>132</sup> The seven authors are Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas, Sean Mallon, Lissant Bolton, Deirdre Brown, Damian Skinner, Susanne Kuchler.

a part in that work by showing how personal narratives deepen one's understanding of artists making history in Oceania.

Opportunities for further investigation in the field of contemporary art that would benefit from a talking story method are limited only by the researcher's interest in listening and the life expectancy of the artist. This thesis alone presents some further possibilities.

Documenting Ema's progress to realising the Suva Biennale, which she hopes to produce in 2020, would certainly be a worthwhile project. Also, an oral history of Fresh Gallery Otara would be useful and informative on many levels. As with the founding principles of the gallery, the project could start with a series of community consultations. Interviews from various perspectives – gallery managers Ema and Nicole, artists, local audience members of all ages, curators, the academics who were disappointed not to receive the gallery's marketing, neighbouring businesses in the Otara Town Centre – would further our understanding of Fresh Gallery Otara's contribution to contemporary Oceanic art. More importantly, an oral history of Fresh would illustrate how the gallery has served its community.

This thesis provides opportunities to see gaps in our current knowledge of even senior artists who have been the subject of much scholarship. For example, looking at Robin White's movement through Oceania has created space for me to envisage further research (should the opportunity arise) focusing on her many collaborations throughout Oceania, including Aotearoa New Zealand. It would be an opportunity to discuss work that has come out of Oceania and created by people of Oceania but are not often discussed in the field of Oceanic art. But more importantly, because many of Robin's collaborations look deeply at the human condition and work toward restoring a sense of order and beauty, the monograph would also give voice to the stories she and her collaborators explore, as well as investigate the circumstances under which they deem making art a meaningful thing to do.

Talking story methodology demands that the scholar listen instead of lecture. By listening we gain a better understanding of who the artists are and how they have come to find their voices and forms of expression. Listening to them telling their stories in their own words allows human moments to emerge. Some of the participants even found the conversations therapeutic. Talking story about both art and life brings together the “personal” and the “art historical.” It honours Oceanic oral traditions. And, it introduces readers/viewers/scholars to not only art but also to artists. The talking story methodology encourages conversations about what drives a person’s passion to be creative.

More instances of inviting artists into substantive conversations, as opposed to having them confirm our findings, will transform the knowledge we have about the artists and arts of Oceania because in many cases, understanding realities of contemporary Oceanic artists is necessary to understanding their work. In academia, the interpretations made by scholars will always be important, but this methodology moves the “new art history” forward by creating room for and giving voice to the artists and by inviting them to have a say in how they are represented. With inspiration from influences such as *Speaking in Colour*, Alicia Partnoy’s “co/labor/actions,” and the *Pasifika Styles* exhibition, which involved artists from the development phase, this thesis sets an example of how scholars can create opportunities that privilege artists speaking in their own words about what is important to them. More work that listens for and incorporates artists’ voices will surely deepen our understanding of contemporary Oceanic artists and their artistic practices.

Even though opportunities have grown, over the years, for artists to speak at academic conferences, symposia, and gallery talks; publish papers; and even collaborate with academics to produce exhibitions and their accompanying publications, Mallon and Pereira’s 1997 observation still rings true:

When it comes to commentary on art the most familiar voice we hear is that of the reviewer or art critic whose voice helps us to appreciate and

understand art in a wider context. Another voice of equal or greater value, but seldom heard, is the voice of the artist. (*Speaking in Colour* 10)

## **LAST WORDS**

Before interviewing each of the participants, I left with them a questionnaire just to prompt the flow of creative juices. In addition to eleven questions I borrowed from the Proust Questionnaire, I also asked, “What is art?” and “Why do you make art?” As with the interviews, answering any question was entirely up to the participants. Even though I could not keep my word to Ioane and present a conversation without any conclusions, I have done my best to give the artists the final say concerning their chapters. To also give them the last word in this thesis, here are their answers:

### **What is art?**

Art is creative output. Art is that which satisfies our innate need for order and beauty. So, art could be anything that satisfies that need that every human being is hard wired for. Art is whatever you cannot define. Art is something that gets your heart racing. The world is art, but not one thing is art. Art is not a word that exists in any Polynesian vocabulary. Creativity is art. There is no such thing as art.

### **Why do you make art?**

I don’t. I make art to maintain sanity and balance; to express difference; to understand myself and my world; to represent; to articulate opinion; to add diversity to the Pacific art landscape. I make art because I made a decision that that was what I was going to do, for the rest of my life; that was it. The classic answer is, “I make art to breathe.” I still haven’t solved that one; I just know that I do it. Hopefully, I am not defined just by the things I make.

## Appendix A (Information Sheet)

[On University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts letterhead. The department of Art History and Theory was housed in the School of Fine Arts when the information sheets were distributed.]

### INFORMATION

You are invited to participate as a subject in the research project *Talking Story about Art and Living: narratives of contemporary Oceanic artists and their work*.

The aim of this project is to explore artists' life stories as well as narratives in their work. The main objective of the project is to allow artists to choose their own representations in their own words.

Your involvement in this project will take place during a period of about two years (September 2008 – September 2010). During this period you will be asked to keep the researcher apprised of upcoming exhibitions of your work. You will also be asked to participate in approximately three unstructured interviews covering topics of your life and your work. Each interview is expected to be approximately 90 minutes in length. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time, including withdrawal of any information provided.

As a follow-up to this investigation, you will be asked to review the biography and narratives the researcher will have written about you (often in your own words from the interviews) for approval and any further input.

In the performance of the tasks and application of the procedures there are risks of miscommunication and misunderstanding with the researcher. If misunderstandings occur, Chikako (the researcher) will work toward keeping lines of communication open in order to resolve any problems. The interviews and questionnaire are intended to create an environment where the participant feels comfortable to convey her/his stories. By no means does the researcher intend to offend the participants. The researcher does have a grounding in Pacific Islands Studies, but she may be unaware of customs or practices unique to each participant.

The results of the project are intended to be published as part of the researcher's PhD thesis. As the nature of the project is to create an opportunity for the participants to tell their own stories in their own words, the participants will be identified by name. If there is information a participant wishes to remain confidential, it will not be included in the thesis. Participants will be given a final opportunity to change, add, or withdraw information before the project's final write up.

The project is being carried out as a requirement for a PhD by Chikako Yamauchi under the supervision of Karen Stevenson. Chikako can be contacted at 027 329 0609. She will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.



## Appendix B (Consent Form)

[On University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts letterhead. The department of Art History and Theory was housed in the School of Fine Arts when the consent forms were distributed.]

### CONSENT FORM

NAME (please print): .....

I have read the project proposal of *Talking Story about Art and Living: narratives of contemporary Oceanic artists and their work*. The project is being carried out as a requirement for a PhD by Chikako Yamauchi under the supervision of Karen Stevenson. They can be contacted at University of Canterbury, School of Fine Arts, Art History, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, (03) 364 2159.

I understand the nature of the project and my involvement in it. I voluntarily agree to participate in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that I will be given an opportunity to delete, change, or add to the narratives and questionnaire answers before the thesis goes into its final draft. As the nature of the project is to create an opportunity for me and other participants to tell our own stories in our own words, I understand I will be identified by name.

I also understand that I may at any time withdraw from the project, including withdrawal of any information I have provided.

I note that the project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C (Questionnaire)

[On University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts letterhead. The department of Art History and Theory was housed in the School of Fine Arts when the questionnaires were distributed.]

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview questions will be generated from biographical research and the narratives in your life and work. This questionnaire is a departure from that approach.

This questionnaire is adapted from the questions asked at the end of every episode of *Inside the Actor's Studio*, a television program during which James Lipton interviews one actor per episode. The quick round of questions at the end allows viewers (and the respondents themselves) a different kind of glimpse into what makes the respondents tick. The questionnaire is a shortened version of what is known as the "Proust Questionnaire." French writer Marcel Proust did not create the questionnaire but he made it popular around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then it has often been used to reveal people's tastes and aspects of their personalities. Although the first eleven questions may seem unrelated to my inquiry into your life as an artist, I feel the questionnaire may open up your mind space to talk about the narratives in your life and your work in more dimensions than you may have otherwise considered. Feel free to use separate sheets to answer, to answer orally at an interview session instead of in writing, or not to answer any question.

1. What is your favourite word?
2. What is your least favourite word?
3. What turns you on creatively, spiritually or emotionally?
4. What turns you off creatively, spiritually or emotionally?
5. What sound or noise do you love?
6. What sound or noise do you hate?
7. What would be your greatest misfortune?
8. What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?
9. What profession would you not like to do?
10. If Heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates?
11. Who are your heroes/heroines?
12. What is art?
13. Why do you make art?

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